MISADVENTURE

BY

W. E. NORRIS

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MISADVENTURE

BY

W. E. NORRIS

AUTHOR OF

"MY FRIEND JIM," MAJOR AND MINOR," "LA BELLE AMERICAINE," "MATRIMONY,"
ETC., ETC.

IN THREE VOLUMES

VOL. III.

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MISADVENTURE

CHAPTER I.

SYMPATHY

The nineteenth century has its drawbacks; but it also has its conspicuous advantages, amongst which ought surely to be numbered the almost universal use of tobacco. How in the world did our ancestors manage to get on without it? How do women manage to get through life and preserve their serenity (but, to be sure, they don't always) without it now? For reasons which must be obvious to everybody, one hesitates to advocate the adoption of smoking among young and pretty women; yet it seems certain that upon them no less than upon us nicotine would exercise a beneficent influence as a sedative to the nerves and an incentive to broad and philosophic views of the accidents of

existence. If Cicely's meditations in the garden had been accompanied and soothed by a cigarette, she would perhaps have recognized that it is human to be inconstant; that loves and friendships come and go as the sun rises and sets, and the years pass on; that very little of what happens to us is of any consequence; that it is hardly worth while to be angry with anybody for being what Nature made him, and other facts equally indisputable and consolatory. But either because she was denied the blessing conferred upon mankind by Sir Walter Raleigh, or by reason of her youth, or on account of some inherent defect in her individuality, she was unable to resign herself with a shrug of her shoulders to the state of things in the present and the prospect of the future. Both struck her as eminently discouraging, dispiriting, and of a nature to undermine all belief in the race to which we belong. Whatever might be said or thought of Archie, nobody, surely, would have supposed him to be other than a straightforward, honourable man; if he was not to be trusted, who was? She thought over the list of her acquaintance—a tolerably long one—and in not one of them, except Bobby Dare, could she feel absolutely convinced that there was no guile. But poor, honest Bobby was

far away, fighting the battle of humanity against the slave-trade, so that for all practical purposes he had to be dismissed as non-existent. Aunt Susan, of course, was honest enough according to her lights, but Aunt Susan's lights were a little dim, and her vision was so obscured by prejudices of different kinds that it was almost necessary to hold her at arm's length.

During luncheon, accordingly, Miss Skipwith was held at arm's length, and was proportionately aggrieved. She felt constrained to say :

"I know very well, my dear, that you are keeping something back from me. I am not inquisitive and I do not ask for your confidence, still you might remember that I have always loved you as if you were my own child, though you may never have looked upon me as any substitute for your mother."

Cicely could only declare that she was concealing nothing and had said all that there was to say. She was sorry to appear unkind; but there was no help for it. As a confidante, Aunt Susan really would not do. As soon as possible she made her escape, and, returning to her old post in the garden, gave herself up once more to moralizing of a sad and cynical character.

Some very enviable people are able to derive much

placid enjoyment from absolute idleness; but Cicely was not one of these. Like a great many dogs, and the generality of horses and all servants, she went to the bad when she had no work to do, and she had fretted herself into a condition of utter disgust with everything and everybody by the time that the butler came ambling across the grass to inquire whether she would see Mr. Chetwode, who was at the front door. It was only after some seconds of deliberation that she replied:

"Yes. Ask him to come out here, please."

She was not sure that she particularly wanted to see Mark for his own sake, but she did rather particularly want to hear whether he could throw any light upon the origin of recent events, and she thought it by no means improbable that he had called for the purpose of so doing.

Mark's visit, it need scarcely be said, had been prompted by that kindly intention. Presently he stepped out of the sunlight into the shade, holding his hat in one hand and extending the other, while upon his features was discernible just so much regret and anxiety as could be expressed without risk of impertinence. Cicely saw at a glance that he was aware of

what had occurred, and she did not care to fence with him.

"I suppose you know," she began almost immediately, "that Archie has gone away?"

He made a sign of assent with some apparent reluctance, and allowed a short space of time to elapse before he said:

"Yes, I knew that he meant to go. In fact, he came to see me the night before last and told me that he did."

"And did he tell you why he was going?" asked Cicely; for she had made up her mind that if Archie had not done so, she would.

Mark had seated himself in a wicker chair close to hers, and was gravely contemplating a bed of scarlet verbenas at his feet.

"Well, no," he answered; "I can't say that he exactly did that; but from what he did tell me, I understood that he was going away for a long time."

"He is not coming back at all," said Cicely, quietly. "As our engagement has been broken off, he cannot stay here for the present, and he speaks as if he would never stay here again."

Mark glanced quickly up.

"I am not surprised," he said, "and it would be useless affectation to pretend that I am sorry. I once took the liberty of expressing my opinion about your engagement to him at the risk of giving great offence, and what has happened since then hasn't changed my opinion. I can't help being glad that you are free—though, if it makes you unhappy, I am very sorry for that."

"It does make me unhappy," Cicely confessed. "I have no doubt you were right in thinking that our engagement could not end happily; I have thought the same thing myself of late. Still I can't feel satisfied with the way in which it has come to an end."

"Oh, no," agreed Mark, shaking his head; "you can't, of course, feel satisfied with that."

"You see," Cicely went on—for notwithstanding her recent pessimistic cogitations, she believed Mark to be a true friend, and although he said so little, there was something in his manner which seemed to show that he could fully enter into her feelings—"you see, it isn't as though Archie were no relation of mine. In a great many ways he was more like my brother than my cousin, and I thought I knew him thoroughly, and now I find that I didn't know him at all. The Archie whom

I knew would never have acted as he has done," she added, rather pathetically.

Mark still remained silent. Cicely gathered from his expression that he hesitated to put his thoughts into words, so she said:

"I don't at all mind talking about it. If you are any better informed than I am, you would do me a kindness by telling me what you have heard."

"I don't know how far your information goes, Miss Bligh," answered Mark; "mine—that is, all that I had from your cousin—simply amounts to this. He came to my lodgings in a rather excited state to wish me good-bye——"

"On his way from Madame Souravieff's?" interrupted Cicely.

"Had he been there? It was late when he arrived and he did not stay long. He said he wanted to wish me good-bye, as we should probably never meet again, and then he made some confused statement about his leaving England for good. I did not press him to explain himself, because, to tell the truth, I hardly needed an explanation. I quite understood all that he didn't say."

"Did you? I don't think I do," observed Cicely,

after a short pause. "It seems to me a little incomprehensible, in spite of what you told me that afternoon on the beach. I don't mean that Archie's dissatisfaction is incomprehensible, for I suppose that all men naturally wish to be masters in the house where they have to live; but it wasn't only because he was dissatisfied that he went away."

"Oh, he had a more powerful reason, no doubt. In one way that reason is quite as incomprehensible to me as it can be to you; but in another way it isn't. I have seen the same kind of thing occur so often before that I can't regard it as an extraordinary phenomenon, though I admit that it is not easily accounted for. Perhaps the truth is that our weak point is our vanity, and that any woman who is not positively ugly and is clever enough to flatter us in the right way can make fools of us. I speak with all the humility of one who has been made a fool of in his day," added Mark, with a slight laugh.

"And by the same person?"

"By the same person. When I first met Madame Souravieff I was a thoroughly miserable man—even more miserable in some respects than I am now. I had wasted my life in the society of people whose only

object was to amuse themselves and who never succeeded; I had wasted my small fortune in gambling and my time in a monotonous round of dancing, dining, and flirting. I was utterly sick of it all. I myself was just as selfish and stupid and bored as my so-called friends, only I was a shade worse off than they were because I was less resigned. As a matter of course I fell, without a struggle to save myself, under the influence of a woman who lived in the world, yet seemed to have ideas and ideals and enthusiasms which the world, in a social sense, usually laughs at. But perhaps this fragment of autobiography doesn't interest you?"

"It interests me very much," said Cicely. "Please go on."

"Well, I became Madame Souravieff's most ardent admirer. I won't say that I fell in love with her, because I have since seen reason to believe that I did not know what love was at that time, but at any rate I thought myself in love with her. Perhaps I did not altogether agree with her political opinions; but that did not prevent me from placing myself unreservedly at her disposition and joining the secret societies which she asked me to join, and believing in her sincerity, if

I didn't believe very much in the triumph of her schemes. As far as that goes, I believe in her sincerity still. She really loves Russia, and really thinks that Russia has a sacred mission to drive the infidel out of Europe. Whether she and her friends will help Russia by stirring up premature disturbances in Servia and Bulgaria is, of course, another question. What captivated me, and what may perhaps have captivated your cousin, was her courage and a sort of sanguine cheeriness which never deserted her, and, above all, the conviction which she was pleased to profess that nobody could serve her and her cause as well as I could."

All this was perfectly true; so that there was no need for any skill on Mark's part in order to lend an air of verisimilitude to a narrative which did not fail to impress his hearer.

"Yes," she said, "but you are half a Russian and have lived in Russia. Archie is an Englishman, if ever there was one."

Mark drew down the corners of his mouth and jerked up his shoulders.

"Under certain circumstances," he remarked, "one might be persuaded to consider oneself a Chinaman."

"Then if Archie has been what you call captivated,

it is by Madame Souravieff herself, not by her political ideas."

"I can't tell; she has many methods, but always one dominant aim, and it would not surprise me in the least if the next news that you had from your cousin reached you from Bulgaria. It is probable that she will very soon forget all about him now. She has scored a signal victory, and that ought to satisfy her."

"She is a very bad woman!" exclaimed Cicely, suddenly.

"Not so very, I think. Her impression, you may be sure, is that she has done you a service, and in all truth and honesty I can't but agree with her."

"And what about Archie? You seem as ready to forget him as you say that she is."

"I own that I haven't much compassion for him. I may be unduly partial to myself, but my case strikes me as a very different one from his. Madame Souravieff found me virtually alone in the world; she might have turned me round her little finger if she had been much less pretty and pleasant and kind than she was, and I really don't think that I should have been very much to blame. But what is there to be said for your cousin, who had everything that a man could wish or

hope for, and deliberately threw it all away because he was silly enough to believe that a woman ten years older than himself appreciated him more than you did? I can forgive him, because his loss is your gain, but as for pitying him, I should have to see things in quite another light before I could do that."

Cicely herself did not find it easy to pity Archie or to plead extenuating circumstances on his behalf. All that she could say was:

"It may be quite true that Madame Souravieff appreciated him more than I did. I was very fond of him and I am so still; but I never cared for him in the way that he professed to care for me, and I never pretended that I did."

"Ah!" ejaculated Mark, drawing a long breath.

"There is no harm in my admitting that, now that it is all over," Cicely went on. "I suppose I ought not to have accepted him at all, but he wished it, and my father wished it. There was so much to be said in favour of the marriage and so very little against it."

Mark nodded.

"At any rate," he observed, presently, "you must be glad to feel that you have nothing to reproach yourself with, and, if you will pardon my saying so, I am

very glad to feel that your future is now at your own disposition again. You were going to dispose of it after a fashion which would have made you wretched: it is something to know that that danger is past, whatever other dangers may be coming."

Another danger was doubtless at hand; but Cicely did not perceive it, nor was her companion imprudent enough to give her any premature warning of its approach. For the present he was content to play the part of a sincere and sympathizing friend; in which character she was very willing to welcome him. He left her decidedly more cheerful than he had found her, and before he went away he ventured to impress upon her the advisability of bringing no accusation, direct or indirect, against Madame Souravieff.

"She would only deny all knowledge of the fugitive," he observed; "and I am afraid that perhaps she would exult over you a little."

This caution, which had the effect of making Cicely laugh for the first time, was, it need hardly be said, superfluous; but Mark—as indeed had been shown by his demeanour throughout the interview—was a very cautious man.

CHAPTER II.

AN ATHLETIC MEETING

Cicely was not a little surprised by the calmness with which Archie's desertion of her was generally acquiesced in. Being quite unaware that for some time past everybody had been saying to everybody else that this kind of thing really couldn't go on much longer, you know, she gave her neighbours credit for more tact and good feeling than they possessed, and was grateful to them for sparing her the condolences which she had dreaded. She made no secret of the fact that her engagement was broken off. That was an announcement which must of necessity be made sooner or later, and might just as well be made at once. Besides, Aunt Susan, who had suddenly remembered that she owed a great many visits, would not have found it possible to hold her peace, even if she had been requested to do so.

Those were days of much quiet enjoyment for Miss

Skipwith. The old lady drove about from house to house, telling her tale in low, confidential tones, and claiming—as indeed no one could dispute her right to do—that from the very outset she had had a bad opinion of "Mr. Archibald Bligh." That the very last thing she had ever expected him to do was to renounce the brilliant prospect for which she believed him to have schemed was a matter of detail upon which she laid no stress. Unprincipled people can only act in an unprincipled way, and whether their lack of principle may cause them to drift north, south, east or west is evidently a mere question of the set of the prevailing wind. Now all Miss Skipwith's friends agreed with her in thinking that this misguided young man would be found to have shaped his course towards the south-eastward, and they were very sure that somebody else, not less unprincipled, would shortly set sail for a similar destination. It had leaked out that Madame Souravieff was upon the point of quitting Upton Chetwode, and for some reason or other the gossips had become imbued with the conviction that Archie was to await her arrival in Paris. This was very sad and very bad; still things might doubtless have been worse. They would have been a great deal worse, for example,

if the disgraceful affair had occurred after Cicely's marriage instead of before it, and one could not be thankful enough that the poor girl had escaped so terrible a danger. The good people of the vicinity had, therefore, excellent reasons for refraining from condoling with her, in addition to one which they would not willingly have admitted—namely, that they were all a little frightened of the young heiress.

A solitary exception was found in the person of Mr. Lowndes, who neither feared anybody (unless, perhaps, his wife at times) nor was disposed to believe in statements which struck him as well-nigh incredible. He went over to the Priory and had a long talk with Cicely, whom, however, he did not succeed in persuading that Archie was the victim of some misunderstanding or intrigue.

"But, my dear girl," he exclaimed, somewhat impatiently, "you must know as well as I do that the poor lad is incapable of such conduct! If anybody were to tell you that I had been seen drunk in the pulpit, would you believe it?"

"I should have to believe it if I saw it with my own eyes," answered Cicely; and to put an end to further discussion, she produced her cousin's letter, which

certainly appeared to be convincing, yet failed to convince the stubborn Rector.

Mr. Lowndes, therefore, wrote a kindly letter to Archie's club in London, but received no reply; and so in a surprisingly short space of time the luckless fellow was dismissed from the minds of those amongst whom he had seemed destined to spend the remainder of his life. It is true that he had never taken any great pains to make himself popular.

Mark Chetwode did not think he would promote his own interests by becoming a frequent visitor to the Priory; but he managed without much exercise of ingenuity to meet Miss Bligh every day; and what proved these encounters to be quite unpremeditated was that they took place in the most improbable spots. Once it was in a back-alley of Abbotsport; once it was in the pine-wood adjoining the Upton Chetwode Park; once it was in a deserted timber-yard outside the village, whither she had betaken herself for a little quiet meditation, and where he assuredly could not have dreamt of coming across her—unless, indeed, he had been watching her movements from round the corner, which, as a matter of fact, was precisely what he had been doing. She began to look forward to

seeing this grave, reserved friend, who may possibly have realized what an extremely interesting quality reserve is. He always implied a good deal more than he said, the advantage of that method being that implications are usually understood by the person to whom they are addressed, but that neither you nor that person need accept any responsibility for them. It pleased Cicely to ignore the humble adoration at which Mark hinted; but she was very well aware that he admired her and saw no reason why he should not, a great many people having done that without any bad consequences to themselves. She was accustomed to the admiration of men, and his was not the less agreeable to her because it had been so long withheld.

What she was quite unconscious of was that she was falling into the habit of asking for Mark's advice and taking it. To be sure, he was careful to make his advice chime in with what he believed to be her inclinations; but, whether intentionally or not, he was gradually assuming a certain air of authority in giving his opinion which she did not dislike.

"Oh, I think you ought to be there," he said decisively one afternoon, when she told him that she had doubts about attending the annual athletic meeting

which her father had instituted for the benefit of the Abbotsport young men, and at which she had always hitherto given away the prizes; "you will disappoint them if you don't show yourself, and nobody will take your appearance as an intimation that you wish to go into society again."

"That is what I was not quite sure about," answered Cicely, hesitatingly. "It has grown to be quite a large affair now, and the whole county comes to it."

"But who will present the prizes if you do not? Miss Skipwith?"

Cicely laughed.

"No; I'm afraid that would hardly do," she answered. "Besides, nothing would induce Aunt Susan to make herself so conspicuous. I suppose I had better go through it; though it will be a little bit of an ordeal."

"You are one of those people who never shirk ordeals," observed Mark, meditatively; and he thought to himself that it would be no bad plan to let the county see him standing at Miss Bligh's elbow on the occasion of the prize-giving. Public opinion is not of much value, still it is always more or less desirable that one's position should be recognized.

Thus it came to pass that when the A.A.C. (Abbots-

port Athletic Club) held its summer meeting, Cicely, dressed in the deepest of mourning, took her accustomed place in the front of the covered platform which had been erected for the accommodation of distinguished patrons. The performances, if not quite up to the Lillie Bridge standard, were creditable enough, considering that not even the influence of Mr. Bligh had ever availed to persuade an Abbotsport lad of the necessity of going into training; and the weather was fine, and the squires and squiresses from far and near had driven over to smile benignly upon the competitors. Among the last to arrive were the Dares, whom Cicely had not expected to see, and who greeted her with much warmth. They had only reached home on the previous evening, they explained, and as soon as Sir George and Lady Dare had turned away to make civil speeches to other neighbours, Miss Jane came to the front.

Miss Jane's manner was unwontedly cordial and confidential. She said:

"My dear Cicely, I am so glad you are here. I was half afraid that you wouldn't be, and I have such a number of things to tell you about. Wouldn't you like to take a turn round the ground?"

Cicely had no objection. She had lived for so many weeks in comparative solitude that she was bewildered and distressed by the hum of voices round her, and the incessant stretching forth of hands which she was obliged to shake.

"Well, first of all," began Miss Dare, when they had passed outside the circle of spectators, "I must tell you that Bobby is coming home and may arrive any day. It seems that the wounds which he received in that affair where he behaved so splendidly were really more serious than was represented. At any rate, they haven't healed properly, and he has been ordered out of that hot climate on sick-leave."

Cicely said she was glad that Bobby was coming back to England, but sorry for the cause of his return.

"Oh," said Miss Dare, "we are not at all alarmed about him; a little care and nursing will soon put him right, we hope; it was on his account that we hurried home from Wiesbaden, instead of going on to Switzerland, as usual, for my father to recruit himself after the baths. And whom do you think that we made acquaintance with at Wiesbaden? No less a person than Count Souravieff, the husband of that detestable woman!"

"So I heard from the detestable woman herself," remarked Cicely. "At least she told us that she had had a letter from her husband, and, as he seemed to know all that was taking place here, we presumed that he must have met you."

"You don't mean to say that she mentioned her husband to you? What impudence! It appears that she had completely deceived the poor old man as to her whereabouts, and he was in a great state of mind when he heard that she was actually living in Mr. Chetwode's house. Mamma is so very sorry now that she called upon her."

"I don't think Lady Dare need regret it on Mr. Chetwode's account," said Cicely. "He has only a friendly regard for his tenant—if he has that."

"Well, not on Mr. Chetwode's account *only*, of course," answered Miss Dare, with a tentative side-glance at her companion; "but—but really she seems to be such a dreadful woman altogether. Cicely dear, I wonder whether you will mind my saying how very sorry I was to hear of the way in which your engagement to your cousin had ended."

"Not in the least," replied Cicely; "it makes a pleasant change. Up to now, nobody, except Mr.

Lowndes, has expressed anything but satisfaction that it had come to an end."

Miss Dare pointed out that what had moved her to sorrow was the manner in which the rupture had occurred, not the rupture itself, "which I couldn't honestly pretend to regret. And are you still upon speaking terms with Madame Souravieff?" she inquired, with some curiosity.

"I haven't seen her for some little time," answered Cicely; "but I am on speaking terms with her, as far as I know. Why should I not be?"

Miss Dare, being a matter-of-fact person, was about to reply to this question when she was checked.

"Of course I understand what you mean," Cicely said; "but I don't know and don't want to know whether there is any truth in what you seem to have heard. Archie and I are not going to be married, because we agreed that we should disagree as husband and wife; that is reason enough for our having parted, I suppose. Now I think we ought to be going back to the stand."

It was indeed about time to do so, for now the last race had been run and the last attempt to accomplish the high jump had failed, and Mr. Lowndes was clearing

his voice in preparation for the speech in which he proposed to announce that Miss Bligh had very kindly consented to hand the prizes to those who had so well earned them. Nobody could be better qualified than Cicely to discharge this duty. Being, as she was, personally acquainted with the winners, she knew exactly what to say to them and was able to dismiss each in turn with a satisfied grin upon his face. Mark Chetwode, who had arrived somewhat late, had taken up his station close behind her and handed her the cups, clocks, and other useful and ornamental objects as they were required.

Some people, amongst whom was Miss Dare, thought this a rather forward proceeding on Mr. Chetwode's part, and exchanged whispered observations about him which were neither kind nor complimentary; but their criticisms were diverted into another channel when a certain showy victoria, which everybody recognized, was seen advancing at a brisk pace across the grass outside the enclosure.

"Surely," exclaimed everybody, "she will never have the face!" But secretly everybody hoped that she would; because, however much one may deprecate brazen assurance in the abstract, there is no denying

that a flagrant exhibition of it affords a certain degree of pleasurable excitement to spectators.

Of that pleasure and excitement Madame Souravieff had no intention of depriving the assembled company. Strictly speaking, she was scarcely entitled to demand admittance to a stand which was supposed to be reserved for subscribers; but her claim was not disputed. The two rural constables who guarded the entrance saluted her respectfully as she swept past them, and presently she appeared in the midst of the gathering of notables, all eyes being turned upon her with glances of mingled curiosity and hostility. Lady Dare's bow was quite a work of art in its way. She managed it by straightening her shoulders, throwing her head back and then very slightly bending her neck, at the same time sticking her chin out and lowering her eyelids. In large cities, where people perhaps have not time to study niceties of demeanour, such appalling salutations are not common; but in the provinces they may be seen from time to time, and the effect of them is enough to crush all heart out of the most audacious. If Madame Souravieff was not crushed, it was because she was too preoccupied to notice anything more than that some dowdy old woman or other was bowing to her.

She made her way at once to the front of the platform, where Mark was standing beside the red-covered table, and the moment that Mark saw her face he knew that she was in one of her most dangerous moods. What had occurred to irritate her he had no idea, but very evident it was that she was irritated—which was as much as to say that she was reckless. She pushed past him, taking no heed of the detaining hand which he stretched out, and with a smiling face, but somewhat harsh voice, greeted Cicely, who was a little startled, having had no warning of her approach.

"How do you do, Miss Bligh? I could not deny myself the pleasure of assisting at this idyllic fête. You are bestowing rewards, I see, upon the successful gymnasts. And have you no reward for your clever assistant, Mr. Chetwode? He is modest; he keeps himself in the background; yet I know nobody who can perform more remarkable gymnastics than he. I mean moral gymnastics; but those are perhaps the most difficult, after all."

Cicely looked surprised, but only said rather coldly:

"How do you do, Madame Souravieff?"

That was, no doubt, the best answer that she could make, and the expectant magnates, who had

eagerly watched the encounter, without hearing what passed between the two ladies, exchanged approving glances, feeling that their representative had so far had the best of it.

The next minute Cicely had to present a beaker to a blushing young giant who held an enormous pair of hands to receive it, so that Madame Souravieff was prevented from continuing her remarks. Before she could commit herself further Mark stepped up to her, and, with his usual impassive countenance, said in Russian:

"Do you wish to appear perfectly ridiculous in the presence of a number of people who are longing for an excuse to laugh at you? If not, perhaps you will tell me what is the matter before you make a scene."

She replied in a low, fierce tone, and in the same language:

"You are trying to play your game without me; you have told me lies. That was not wise of you, my friend."

"It might have been even less wise to tell you the truth," observed Mark, coolly. "At any rate you had better give me a chance of hearing your explanation and offering mine. I will drive back with you when

this business is over if you will allow me. And if you came here for the purpose of denouncing me to Miss Bligh, I may remind you that that can be done quite as well to-morrow as to-day."

"I think," said Madame Souravieff, "that you would be rightly served if I were to do it now."

"Possibly; though I do not know why. The effect would be dramatic, I daresay; only it might also be a trifle grotesque, might it not?"

Madame Souravieff sighed and yielded. She had quite meant to be dramatic; but she did not particularly wish to be grotesque, and Mark's composure chilled her. So she sat down in a chair which he obligingly pushed forward, and the proceedings terminated with a tameness which was rather disappointing to some of the lookers-on.

CHAPTER III.

THE MEMORY OF THE PAST

THE explanation which Mark Chetwode had suggested of Archie's sudden disappearance had not been altogether disagreeable to Madame Souravieff, although she had not, of course, believed in it. Her own impression was that the young man had gone off in a fit of irritation, and would probably return ere long in a penitent frame of mind. Meanwhile her vanity was flattered by what had appeared very like a slight exhibition of jealousy on Mark's part. But on the day of the Abbotsford athletic meeting she received a letter from an intimate friend in London which caused her to view the situation in a very different light.

"What strange people you and Mr. Chetwode are!" this friend wrote, "and what strange recruits you manage to get hold of! Frankly, my dear, what has this poor, innocent, stupid young Englishman done to you? That is a question which you will not answer,

I suppose, though you know I am as discreet as I am inquisitive. But at least do not tell me that he is animated by ardour for the great cause, or that you have persuaded him to adopt ideas which certain politicians in this country have gravely accepted from you. No, no; that really will not do! I grant you the politicians, who are ignorant and self-complacent enough to believe in anything; but a simple soldier, who relies upon the evidence of his own senses and could never be made to understand how black can be white—*allons donc!* And you take no half-measures with him either; he has gone all lengths, I understand. What surprises me is that you should have been able to induce the persons whom we know of to accept him. It is true that you are better acquainted with those persons and their requirements than I am; for I, as you are aware, do not propose to go all lengths. I only saw this Mr. Bligh for a few minutes—a nice young man, with a countenance of the deepest despair and an air of being tired of life. Well, if he wishes somebody to relieve him of that burden, one must confess that he has been fortunate in falling in with the right sort of friends."

These observations infuriated Madame Souravieff all

the more because she was no better informed than her correspondent as to their exact significance. It was a sore point with her that, for all her plotting and scheming, she had never been fully trusted by those who made use of her talents. The mysterious persons alluded to were really mysterious to her; she held no direct communication with them, she was only allowed occasional glimpses of their plans, and it had galled her that her *protégé* Mark Chetwode was admitted into inner circles from which she herself was excluded. And a noble use he seemed to have made of his privileges! Naturally, what most excited Madame Souvarieff's wrath was to find that she had been tricked, and that Mark was so desperately eager to get rid of his rival; but in addition to that, she really felt a glow of indignation at the means which he had adopted to secure his end. One may be a conspirator without being an assassin.

The upshot of some stormy self-communings was that she resolved to present herself at the athletic sports in the manner described. And it was with the full intention of making a scene that she had herself driven thither. What did she care for the amazement or consternation of the assembled company? She was going away from the place; she would never see these people

again; they might say and think just what they pleased about her. Only Mark should be taught that it was dangerous to play a double game with the woman whom he had pretended to love.

As has been seen, she abandoned her spirited programme because her heart failed her at the last moment; but she was determined to have it out with Mark, and no sooner had he seated himself beside her in her victoria than she began:

"Why did you not tell me that it was you who sent young Bligh away? Why did you not tell me what you had done with him? Was it because you knew that I should never consent to his being employed in such a manner? Was it because you knew that, whatever I may be, I am not a cold-blooded murderess?"

"Before I answer your questions, Olga," replied Mark, composedly, "you will perhaps allow me to put one to you. In what manner do you imagine that Bligh is to be employed?"

"Oh, as to that, there is no need to waste words. I received information from London to-day—you might have guessed that I should—and you cannot deceive me. The man has got his death-warrant."

"Indeed? If so, I can only say that I am quite

unaware of it. There is a chance, but not a very strong one, I should think, that he will take part in some desultory fighting before long, and of course he may be shot; but that can scarcely be regarded as equivalent to a death-warrant. If you have heard of his being threatened with any greater danger, you know more than I do."

Now Madame Souravieff, having no certain knowledge of what was implied in "going all lengths," was a little afraid that she would be laughed at if she gave expression to her conjectures. Therefore she only said:

"Why should he be expected to run the risk of being shot in such a cause? What has he to do with Bulgaria?"

Mark shrugged his shoulders.

"Oh, nothing. I sometimes ask myself what I have to do with Bulgaria; yet I suppose it is upon the cards that I may be shot some day in that interesting country. To be sure, I know very well for whose sake it was that I took certain engagements upon me; and I am not convinced that Bligh's case differs very greatly from my own."

"You cannot put me off by talking what you and

I know is nonsense. You have sent him out there because you love that girl, and because you are afraid of him and hope that he will be killed."

"Oh, very well; if you choose to say so! Only I don't know how you suppose that I can have prevailed upon him to be so accommodating."

"That is what you will have to explain to me; but you cannot deny that this is your doing. And why did you conceal the truth from me?"

"For the simple reason that he made me promise not to reveal it. I told you that he came to me in a very excited and incoherent condition. He said he was going away for good and all, and he expressed a wish to see some active service: so I gave him what help I could by writing introductions for him to our friends in London. Of course I was bound to respect his secret, since he made a point of it; but, as you observed just now, it was obvious that you would very soon hear what had become of him."

"I do not believe," said Madame Souravieff, speaking very slowly, "that you are telling me the truth even now."

Mark raised his eyes and scrutinized her steadily for a moment. How would it do to let her hear the

real cause of Archie's flight? Had he felt that it was at all possible to trust her, he would have done so; but she was so capricious and so apt to lose her self-control that she might at any moment blurt out what she knew, and—oddly enough, as many people would think—it was for Archie's sake that he decided to hold his peace. That unlucky fellow was already at the mercy of two persons; it would be rather unfair to add such a third to the number. So he only said:

"I am afraid I cannot give you faith. Perhaps, if you wish to obtain it, your best plan would be to write to Bligh himself. I have the address of his London club."

"I must try to believe you," said Madame Souravieff, sighing. "Evidently I should get no further information by writing, or you would not advise me to write." And then, as if reasoning with herself, she added, "It is possible, after all, that the girl may have goaded him to desperation."

"Yes; the girl—or somebody else," said Mark. "At any rate, he is disposed of, and that is what you wished. At least, so I imagined."

"It isn't always so easy to know what one wishes for," replied Madame Souravieff, with a sigh "I

wonder what you wish for! Or rather, I don't wonder, because I know. Well, so be it! Every dog has his day, and I have had mine. Will you stay and dine with me to-night?"

"I shall be only too delighted."

"I am not sure about that; you must be getting rather tired of dining with me by now, I suspect. But be consoled; this shall be the very last time. Everything in life is uncertain, but I suppose I may say with certainty that in another forty-eight hours I shall have taken a final farewell of Abbotsport."

She did not appear to be looking at Mark; but very probably she could see his face out of the corner of her eye, and it was doubtless wise of him to assume an air of deep concern.

"Must you go?" he asked.

"I don't know that I am absolutely compelled to go; but Boris insists, and my own sense of expediency backs him up. I have done what I wanted to do here—or what I thought wanted to do; the climax is not likely to be interesting, nor can I flatter myself that I shall be very much missed. How glad you will be when you hear that I have reached Paris and that you can count upon carrying this business through in

your own quiet, methodical way, without danger of being put to confusion at any moment by a woman who thinks she has claims upon you!"

Mark thought it best to make a slight grimace and remain silent. He would indeed be glad to know that the English Channel was between him and Madame Souravieff; but in her present unsettled state of mind there would be risk in protesting too loudly that such was not the case.

During the remainder of the drive she said very little, and immediately on reaching the house she went upstairs to dress for dinner. When she reappeared, her guest, who had for some time been awaiting her, with a newspaper which he was not reading in his hand, gave an involuntary exclamation of astonishment. She had arrayed herself with a splendour which seemed wholly inappropriate to the occasion. Her dress, the body and train of which were of pale pink brocade, while the front was of silk, covered with exquisite embroidery of a somewhat darker shade, must have cost a small fortune; a necklace of enormous diamonds encircled her white throat, and in her dark hair blazed a tiara of the same jewels. She stood looking down upon him for a moment with an ironical

smile upon her lips; and then all of a sudden he understood. Years before—it seemed a great many years—she had worn an exactly similar costume at a ball at the Winter Palace in St. Petersburg, and on that evening he had ventured to tell her, for the first time in plain words, that he loved her. How well he remembered it!—all the better because until that moment he had so completely forgotten it. But now the whole scene came back to him; the tall erect figure of the late Czar: the crowd of officials in their showy uniforms; the jewels, the multitude of lights, the heated air, and the heavy scent of the flowers. He saw himself too, tired, disconsolate, thoroughly disenchanted with existence. And this woman, who at the very least had given him a fresh interest in life—well, perhaps he had been mistaken; but certainly he had held very exalted ideas about her at the time. For although she had listened to him without anger or surprise, and although she had not shrunk from admitting that she cared for him, she had in a certain sense held him at arm's length. Later in their acquaintance she had become more reckless in her speech; but neither then nor at any subsequent period had he been guilty of any disrespect towards her, save that of repeating that he loved her. And she had

said what he himself had felt, that we cannot help loving and ought not to be blamed for it; but that when we are condemned to unhappiness it is better to try and make others happy than to sit still and groan. And thus it was that she had persuaded him to labour for the happiness of the Slavonic races. Perhaps he had never cared very much about the Slavonic races; certainly he had soon grown weary of the labours which they were said to require of his hands, and afterwards he had wearied of other things and people into the bargain. But at this moment a vivid flash of memory made his heart ache and brought an unwonted ring of tenderness into his voice as he said:

"Ah, you haven't forgotten, then!"

"I do not forget easily," Madame Souravieff answered, "it is you who need reminders."

She was pleased, however, that the reminder had proved so effectual, and presently, when they moved into the dining-room, she essayed, not without a measure of success, to employ those attractions which had captivated Mark and many another man besides in days gone by. Wholly successful she could not be, and she knew that she could not. She knew it, that is to say, in much the same sense as she knew that her

hair was turning grey and that she had lost her youth beyond recall. Patent facts cannot be disputed; yet when such facts relate to oneself, one is apt to admit them with a mental reservation, and if there had been no reservation in Madame Souravieff's mind, she would hardly have astonished her guest and her servants by donning that pink gown and those diamonds. She could talk very brightly and cleverly; she had little tricks of speech and manner which were peculiar to her, and she was looking extremely handsome. Of course it was all in vain; but there was just a possibility of its not being in vain, and under certain circumances one has to make the best of possibilities.

As for Mark, he had to make the best of a situation which was not free from embarrassment and peril. Partly from a feeling of remorse, partly from motives of policy, he met her halfway, dwelling regretfully upon episodes of the past, and ejaculating, with a melancholy smile: "*Ah, l'heureux temps quand nous etions si malheureux!*" And later in the evening, by which time Madame's Souravieff's determination to quit Abbotsport at once had been shown to be irrevocable, he ventured upon less ambiguous language than that.

"It will be impossible for me to live in this house

after you have gone away!" he exclaimed. "I have hated it from the first, and I shall hate it a thousand times more when everything about it will remind me that you were here once and will never be here again."

"I was thinking of asking you to accept the few odds and ends that I brought down from London with me to brighten the rooms up," she said, smiling; "but if you feel in that way about it, perhaps I had better have them removed. However, you will not be called upon to live here very long, and after you have migrated to the Priory you won't often revisit the halls of your ancestors, I daresay. And then you will at last have regained possession of the lands of your ancestors. Doesn't that thought console you?"

"I had forgotten all about them," answered Mark, rather incautiously.

The moment the words were out of his mouth he saw what a stupid blunder he had made; for was not this recovery of the Chetwode property supposed to be the one motive of his courtship? But Madame Souravieff did not appear to notice his slip of the tongue, and he hastened to add:

"Consolations are always discoverable, and one is driven to discover them when one's fate is decided; but

just now I can remember nothing except that this is our last evening together, Olga."

"Oh, it need not be quite so bad as that," she returned with a laugh; "one is permitted to spend a quiet evening with one's friends occasionally, even when they are married. Or do you think that will not be permitted in your case?"

He shook his head gravely.

"I can't tell. All I can see is that I am at the end of a period. And I am a little old for opening fresh periods."

Madame Souravieff gazed intently at his impenetrable face. She did not trust him; yet—it was certain that he had loved her once.

"I wonder," she sighed, "what would happen to us both if I were free at this moment."

"Don't you know?" he asked, reproachfully.

"I thought I did; but perhaps I was mistaken. Of course it would be for you to decide what should happen."

She held out her hand to him.

"Thank you, Mark," she said, simply; "you have given me something pleasant to remember after I go away.

I have sometimes wished that you had never seen Miss Bligh; but if I may still believe that I come first——"

"You will always be first," he declared.

"Then I don't care! Your future will be happier than mine; but when all is said, it has been for your happiness much more than for my own that I have wished."

CHAPTER IV.

THE RETURN OF THE HERO

To suffer from the inconstancy of another is, no doubt, a very painful thing; but it may almost be questioned whether it is not as painful—and certainly it is more provoking—to be the victim of an obstinate constancy which one is unable to share. Madame Souravieff had contrived to make Mark feel remorseful, and after he had left her, he spent some time in wishing that she had not forced him to be so mendacious, or that his professions could have been a shade more sincere, or that she would take a fancy to somebody else; but when he woke the next morning he naturally saw things in a somewhat different light, and was only thankful that she was going away. It was all very well for her to say that she desired nothing but his happiness; but she would never have the patience or forbearance to look on while he worked out his own happiness in his own way, and so long as she remained at Upton Chetwode

the danger of her ruining everything by some sudden *coup de tête* would always be imminent.

Of this she herself was probably aware, and she was also aware of a reluctance to depart which warned her to lose no time in taking her departure. It was characteristic of the woman to drive over to the Priory in order to say good-bye to Cicely Bligh—a ceremony which, under all the circumstances, might very well have been omitted. She did not care about seeing Cicely, and it seemed unlikely that Cicely could be anxious to see her; but, on the other hand, the idea of slinking away from the place like a defaulter was unpleasant to her, and she did not choose to have the appearance of shirking an uncomfortable interview. Like the generality of those who pride themselves upon their tact, Madame Souravieff was prone to disregard ordinary rules in her tactics and to believe that she could carry anything off.

As was to be expected, she met with a very icy reception from Cicely, whose attitude of disdainful reserve she found it impossible to break down.

"I do not know whether we shall meet again in this world, Miss Bligh," she said; "but I never forget my friends, and I shall not forget you. Perhaps I may

have news of you every now and then from Mr. Chetwode."

"Perhaps—if he remains in these parts," answered Cicely.

"I imagine that he will remain in these parts. Will you think me very impertinent if I tell you how glad I was to hear that your cousin had left these parts for good?"

Cicely looked as if she did think her impertinent, but abstained from saying so.

"He is a good young man in his way," Madame Souravieff went on; "but he is not good enough for you, and I am rejoiced that you have found that out in time. I do not even feel sorry for him," she added; "because he would always have been conscious of his inferiority, and it cannot be pleasant for a husband to know that he is his wife's inferior."

"It was not for any reason of that kind that the engagement was broken off," said Cicely, who suspected that Madame Souravieff was covertly laughing at her. "Where do you think of going when you leave this?"

"To Paris in the first instance; after that I shall be guided by circumstances. Possibly I may join my

husband in Germany, but more probably he will implore me to remain away from him. I think I told you that my husband had kindly given me leave to go where I liked, so long as I did not stay in Mr. Chetwode's neighbourhood. I am obliged to obey him, although, as you know, his suspicions are sufficiently ridiculous."

"They certainly seem to be so," said Cicely, coldly.

Madame Souravieff would have paid a good deal of money for the privilege of addressing a few home truths to this supercilious young woman; but she had determined to retain her self-possession. To save herself from losing it, she rose and took her leave; and it was a pity, for her sake, that she did not know how angry she had made her successful rival. To Cicely it seemed evident that she had called for the express purpose of making those few observations about Archie and of hinting, not very obscurely, that she intended to meet him in Paris. She had apparently forgotten the animosity against Mr. Chetwode which she had displayed in so indecorous a manner on the occasion of the prize-giving.

"Well," thought Cicely, "it is not worth while to lose one's temper with her, but I trust I may never see her again."

A few days after this, Mark called at the Priory and

announced that he had once more taken up his abode at Upton Chetwode.

"My tenant has left," he said, "and I am my own master again. For reasons that you know of, I couldn't quite feel that I was that while she was here."

"I don't want to talk about her," answered Cicely, with a gesture of disgust; "let us try to forget her."

"With all my heart," returned Mark, smiling slightly; "but perhaps it is wholesome for me to remember sometimes that she once made a fool of me."

He was very careful and very discreet; he understood that before he could venture to proclaim himself Cicely's lover he must become her trusted friend, and it was in the latter capacity that he strove, as heretofore, to ingratiate himself with her. Upon the whole he was very well satisfied with the progress that he made in the course of the ensuing week. It was not difficult to intercept her on her way to or from the village, and she always seemed glad to meet him—as in truth she was. At the bottom of her heart she may have suspected that he cherished somewhat warmer sentiments than those of mere friendship for her; but as those sentiments, if they existed, were kept to himself, there was no need to trouble about them. He had

a practical, dispassionate way of looking at things which made her think highly of his sagacity, and although she never actually consulted him with reference to the many daily questions upon which it was her duty to adjudicate, she fell into the habit of mentioning these to him in the course of conversation. Probably it did not diminish her good opinion of him to find that his views invariably coincided with her own.

One afternoon she was sauntering homewards with this trustworthy neighbour, whom she had, as usual, encountered by chance on the outskirts of Abbotsport, when the sound of a view halloo behind her made her stop short and look round. There was but one person in the county who would have ventured to attract her attention after that unceremonious fashion, and as the person in question was a very particular friend of hers, she was delighted to recognize his powerful voice. But Sir George Dare, whose thickset figure could be seen advancing rapidly from the distance, was not alone; and who could his slim, interesting-looking companion be? Surely not Bobby, bearded and bronzed, and carrying his left arm in a sling! Bobby, however, it was; and as he drew nearer, Cicely at once perceived that it would not accord with the fitness of things to

address him as Bobby any longer. A few months may suffice to change a boy into a man, and the wounded hero who was taking off his hat to her evidently possessed the right to be called Mr. Dare in future.

"How do you do, my dear?" called out Sir George; and then, in somewhat less cordial accents, "How are you, Chetwode? Bob and I were on our way to pay our respects at the Priory," he continued. "We've got him back, you see, safe and pretty nearly sound. Not quite fit to use his bridle-arm yet; but that's no great loss to him, you'll say. Never mind, Bob, there are more good riders than good fighters in the world, you may depend upon it."

Bobby's sunburnt cheeks assumed a more vivid hue. His father's unconscionable crowing had already made him long to hide his head more than once, and he felt sure that Miss Bligh must be inwardly laughing at them both. But in this he wronged Cicely, who held out her hand to him with a bright smile and said:

"I am so very glad to see you home again, Mr. Dare! Is your arm very bad still?"

"Oh, it's nothing," answered Bobby, rather shamefacedly. "I got rather seedy out there because of the heat, and the doctors made me take sick leave; but

I've really no business to be here. The voyage back put me all right."

"Well, now that you are here, you will have to stay until the doctors allow you to go away again," said Cicely decisively; "and I hope the doctors won't be in any hurry about it. Other people ought to be given a chance of earning glory."

Bobby looked down and murmured something unintelligible. Sir George had marched on ahead with Mark Chetwode, who resignedly accepted the companionship thrust upon him.

"So you're back in your own house, I hear," said Sir George cheerfully. "Not sorry to be out of those stuffy lodgings, I daresay. And what has become of your fair tenant?"

"I think Madame Souravieff said that she intended to go to Paris," answered Mark.

"Oh, she did, eh? Well, that's what everybody seems to have taken for granted. H'm!—queer business, first and last. No business of mine, though, of course."

"A queer business?" repeated Mark, innocently.

"I mean about young Bligh. Probably you know the ins and outs of it a great deal better than I do; but

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it's no secret that your friend was the cause of his engagement being broken off."

Mark emphatically disclaimed the knowledge imputed to him; yet he allowed it to be inferred that he knew more than he cared to talk about. It was desirable that the county should hold the theory suggested by Sir George; but it was not desirable that he should be held in any way responsible for it. As a matter of fact, Sir George was not greatly interested in the question of what had become of Madame Souravieff. That wily old gentleman's object was to afford his son a legitimate opportunity, and he was quite satisfied with his success in that respect. Probably he did not take into account the uncalled-for diffidence with which his son was afflicted.

Bobby, indeed, could find very little to say to the girl whom he still adored and at whom he glanced shyly out of the corner of his eye as he walked beside her; but this was of no great consequence, since Cicely was fully equal to sustaining the whole burden of the conversation. She wished for particulars of the engagement in which he had received his wound, and professed to be much disappointed with the dry and featureless account that he gave her of that affray.

Did he think that he would get the Victoria Cross? Well, what was there to laugh at in that? Was not the Victoria Cross bestowed for acts of conspicuous bravery, and could anybody deny that his acts had been conspicuously brave? At the very least the authorities would take care that he had quick promotion, she supposed. But if there was no certainty about that, and if officers were not necessarily promoted for performing their duty with splendid success, what in the world were they promoted for!

Now such questions as these, together with the succinct replies which they elicited, might have sufficed to keep the conversation alive for an indefinite length of time if Bobby had been disposed to submit to that kind of thing; but, meek as he was, he could not stand more than five minutes of it. In the first place, his modesty was unfeigned, and in the second, he more than half suspected that Cicely's persistency in talking about him was caused by unwillingness to talk about herself. So at last he interrupted her rather bluntly by saying:

"Your life has been more eventful than mine since I saw you last. I wanted to write and tell you how sorry I was to hear of Mr. Bligh's death and—and

all your other troubles; but then I thought perhaps you wouldn't care to be bothered with letters."

Cicely's face became graver and her voice more subdued.

"Of course I should have liked to hear from you," she answered. "Ordinary letters of condolence *are* rather more of a bother than a comfort, perhaps; but yours, I know, would have been sincere. However, I didn't require it to feel sure of your sympathy."

"Well," said Bobby, "I am glad of that." And after a pause, he added: "I have often thought of that evening when I saw you for the last time before I went away. I wonder whether you remember it?"

"I remember it very well; and I remember that you went away without saying good-bye to us—which was not very friendly of you."

"Oh, you know why I did that; it was the best thing I could do. I was only wondering whether you remembered what I said to you about Archie that evening."

"Yes," answered Cicely, with a rather troubled look; "but we needn't go back to that now, need we? You have heard of what has happened since, and—and that it is all over and done with?"

"I am not sure that I have heard all that has happened. My people told me a story which I couldn't quite swallow. About Archie's going away, I mean, and the supposed reason."

"Oh, I daresay people have discovered plenty of supposed reasons. Surely, when Archie and I came to the conclusion that we were not very well suited to one another and that our engagement must be broken off, that was reason enough for his going away."

"But not for his disappearing and leaving no address. I don't wonder that people should believe the story of his having gone off to join the Russian lady abroad; but I don't believe it myself. I know Archie well enough to know that that isn't the kind of thing he would do. He is too much of a gentleman."

It is usually the most simple and modest of men who take the most startling liberties. Bobby seemed to think it so much a matter of course that he should speak in this open way about a delicate subject, that Cicely, though astonished, could not feel offended with him. She said:

"Gentlemen have been known to act in that way before now, I believe. However, I haven't inquired and don't mean to inquire into the truth of the report

that you have heard. The reason which I gave you just now is a sufficient one."

"Yes, if it is a genuine one," answered Bobby gravely; "but is it? I used to think that you would marry Archie to please your father; but afterwards I wasn't so sure. It was a great deal more likely that you cared for him for his own sake. Did you care for him for his own sake?"

Well, really this was a tolerably cool question, and if Bobby had not looked so serious over it, Cicely would have been almost inclined to laugh. As it was, she only said:

"One may care a great deal for people whom one does not think it advisable to marry."

Bobby thought her answer somewhat ambiguous; but, such as it was, he had to content himself with it; for now the colloquy was interrupted by Sir George and Mr. Chetwode, the latter of whom wished to say good-bye. After he had retired, Cicely took her visitors on to the Priory, where they found Miss Skipwith and were refreshed with tea; but nothing further of an interesting nature was discussed except the capture of that slave-dhow, an episode which was not only uninteresting, but was rapidly becoming

hateful to the person who had been chiefly concerned therein.

"May I come and see you again some day soon?" he asked, as he took leave of Cicely; and he received in reply a smiling assurance that he would always be welcome.

This assurance, however, was more satisfactory to Sir George, who overheard it, than to its recipient. However innocent and simple one may be, one knows what deduction to draw from a too ready display of cordiality.

CHAPTER V.

CICELY IS INCENSED

"Well," said Sir George, as he walked away with his son, "how did you get on? Able to report progress, eh? I did the best I could for you, you know."

"I am still rather in the dark," answered Bobby; "I hadn't time to ask many questions. But from what she told me, I'm more convinced than ever that there is some mistake or misunderstanding about Archie."

"Oh, Archie be bothered! He has chosen to make a bolt for it, and who cares whether he is playing the fool in Paris with Madame Stick-in-the-Mud or whether he is disporting himself in Jericho?"

"I think Miss Bligh cares," said Bobby, quietly.

"The deuce you do!" returned his father, glancing sharply at him. "What makes you think that?"

"I can't tell you exactly—her whole manner, I suppose. She didn't say much; but I could see that she felt a good deal. I fancy that if she hadn't cared

for him she would have made some effort to find out the truth. She must know very well that he wouldn't have vanished in that way just because of some lover's quarrel."

"H'm! You've heard what your sister thinks about it?"

"Yes; and I daresay she is right to some extent. It isn't at all improbable that Chetwode would like to step into Archie's shoes, and—and he's a shifty-looking fellow; I don't fancy those shallow eyes of his. Oh, yes; I shouldn't wonder if he was dangerous; only I should want a little more proof before I believed that legend about Madame Souravieff. You see, I've known Archie all my life, and——"

"God bless me!" broke in his father, impatiently; "one would think that you wanted to whitewash the fellow! Would it give you any particular satisfaction to drag him back by the hair of his head and marry him to a girl whose shoes he isn't fit to black?"

"It would, if I thought she wished it. Anyhow, it would give me satisfaction to get at the truth. And, you know, there isn't the slightest hope for me."

"I know nothing of the kind," Sir George declared.

"Well, I know it; and as I can't have what I want,

I should like her to have what she wants. I don't believe she wants to marry Chetwode—yet."

Sir George threw up his hands, tossed his head, and snorted.

"Oh dear! oh dear!" he exclaimed; "what fools we all are when we are young, and how little use our wisdom is to us when we have grown old! If only I were in this fellow's place, I'd undertake to put everything right in a brace of shakes. Don't I know that girls can be made to fall in love with any man who is young and good-looking—especially when he has his arm in a sling! But do you suppose for a moment that this little Don Quixote is going to profit by his advantages! Not he! What he proposes to do is to back up one of his rivals, who has retired from the contest, and to let the other step in and carry off the prize. There's a pretty sort of a raving lunatic for you!"

"But I don't mean Chetwode to carry off the prize, if I can help it," objected Bobby, mildly. "I suspect —but perhaps I had better not say what I suspect yet awhile. At all events, you may be quite sure that if I thought I had any chances, or advantages, as you call them, I shouldn't hesitate to use them."

"That's the first sensible thing I've heard you say," grunted Sir George.

Now, what Bobby suspected was that Mark had somehow or other been instrumental in procuring Archie's removal from the scene; and that his conjecture should have been so correct is a remarkable instance of the kind of acuteness which goes with simplicity. Archie, he reasoned, assuredly had not fled from home and friends on account of any difference that might have arisen between him and Cicely. Somebody, therefore, must have induced him, either by misrepresentations or in some other way, to disappear; and who, except Mark Chetwode, had an interest in his disappearance? Bobby, at all events, could think of no one else; but he resolved to make such inquiries as he could and to keep his weather eye open.

And no doubt it was a very sound instinct that prompted him to apply in the first instance to the Rector of the parish, Mr. Lowndes being so reasonable and sensible a man. Bobby simply put it to this refreshingly sane person whether it was or was not credible that Archie had been guilty of the folly imputed to him, and Mr. Lowndes answered unhesitatingly:

"My dear boy, of course it's incredible, and I have said

so all along. But don't you know that incredible things are always sure to be believed? And, unfortunately, Archie has given people a right to form any conjectures they please about him. I did send a letter after him; but he hasn't taken any notice of it, and I can only suppose that he is under some influence of which I am ignorant. I don't mean Madame Souravieff's influence."

"Exactly so," agreed Bobby: "that is just my own idea. And whose influence *do* you mean?"

Mr. Lowndes was rather reluctant to commit himself to a decided expression of opinion; but when Mark Chetwode's name was suggested to him, he admitted that the surmise did not lack plausibility.

"And since you seem to be interested in the unravelling of this mystery," he added, "I will tell you another thing. That old rascal Coppard knows something. His conscience is not at ease, and he has been asking me questions about Mr. Chetwode which mere curiosity won't account for. If I were a Roman Catholic priest I would get it out of him at once; only then, I suppose, I shouldn't be allowed to tell. As it is, he pretends to be partially imbecile when I try to cross-examine him."

Bobby made a mental note upon the subject and, after a little further conversation, pursued his way to the Priory, whither he was bound. He wanted to hear something rather more definite from Cicely than he had heard in the course of their first interview. Both Miss Bligh and Miss Skipwith were out, he was informed, on reaching his destination; but as this was not a mere formal visit, he did not content himself with leaving his card, but having ascertained that Cicely generally came home soon after five o'clock, said he would stroll about the garden until she returned. That her approach would be from the direction of Abbotsport seemed probable; so he passed along the lawns and terraces and between long beds, gay with dahlias and other autumnal flowers, until he reached the little iron gate whence a footpath led across the falling ground of the park towards the village. There he halted, and, leaning over the fence, awaited events with a somewhat sombre countenance. Because, after all, it is very possible to be a little Don Quixote without finding the part an exhilarating one.

He did not, however, have to chew the cud of his meditations until it turned hopelessly bitter in his mouth; for scarcely five minutes had elapsed before

Cicely hove in sight. She was making her way slowly up the hill, and by her side, as Bobby was not at all surprised to see, walked Mark Chetwode. Somehow he had felt certain that Mark would be with her, and the fulfilment of his expectations only had the effect of making him mutter:

"No, you don't, my fine fellow. Not if I can help it at least."

But he had an amiable smile ready for Cicely and a courteous greeting for her companion, who, being taken by surprise, looked annoyed for about a second. Mark seldom looked annoyed or surprised or anything else for more than a second. His countenance speedily became a total blank, and while Cicely was saying civil things to the intruder, he debated with himself whether he should go on to the house and have a cup of tea or not. He decided that he would not; for he knew that, if this troublesome nautical personage had anything of a disagreeable nature to say, he would sooner or later find some opportunity of saying it, and it was just as well to let him say it now and get it over. That Bobby had been, and probably still was, enamoured of Cicely he was quite well aware; but that in itself could hardly be regarded as an alarming circumstance. He therefore

excused himself from accepting the invitation which was presently extended to him, and scarcely was he out of sight when Bobby, with that directness which seems to be one of the many pleasing and salutary results of a seafaring life, remarked:

"Archie is worth half a dozen of *him*, anyhow!"

"You may as well make it a dozen while you are at it," said Cicely, who was not altogether pleased to find that Archie had so warm a partisan in that unexpected quarter. "Why do things by halves?"

"Well, I don't mind saying a dozen," answered Bobby, generously. "Do you agree?"

"Oh, that's another question. I suppose people and things are worth just what we happen to think them worth, and I daresay Archie might be worth a dozen of Mr. Chetwodes to you."

"But not to you?"

"No, since you ask me, he is not worth quite so much as that to me. Will you come in and have some tea now?"

"Presently, if I may; but I am afraid we shall find your aunt in the room, and while we are alone I want to beg once more for the answer which you wouldn't

give me the other day. I want to know whether you really loved Archie or not?"

"Do you indeed? You are a very determined person, Mr. Dare——"

"You used to call me Bobby once upon a time," interpolated her companion.

"Yes; but now that you have become so stern and dictatorial, I can't venture to be as familiar as I was once upon a time. I was going to say that you are a very determined person, and that I don't wonder at Arab slave-dealers being frightened of you."

"They weren't much frightened; nor are you. Please, give me an answer."

"I did give you one the other day, though I might have claimed the right to refuse it. I told you that one may easily have a sincere affection for a man whom one does not wish to marry."

"Only that's no answer at all, you see. What I want to get at is whether you were glad or sorry to lose him?"

"But—may I make so bold as to remind you that I am not being tried by court-martial? I'm afraid you'll have to be satisfied with hearing what has satisfied other people. Archie and I couldn't agree; so we

parted—that's all. If you are meditating doing us a service by bring us together again, let me assure you that we shouldn't like it. You would never be able to manage anything of the kind; still you had better be spared the trouble of trying."

"I haven't a doubt that I should be doing Archie a service," remarked Bobby, musingly; "but I confess that I am not quite as anxious to serve him as to serve you, and I am not sure what your wishes are. Would it make any difference if I could tell you what made him take to his heels?"

"Can you tell me?" asked Cicely, quickly.

"Then she doesn't know, and she is anxious to know," thought Bobby to himself. He answered: "Not now; but I may contrive to find out before long. Meanwhile, I hope you'll beware of that man Chetwode."

"I don't quite understand you," said Cicely, drawing herself up a little. "Why should I beware of Mr. Chetwode?"

"I can't help fancying that he is at the bottom of this business. It's only an idea, and I haven't any proofs as yet; but——"

"Then, really," interrupted Cicely, "I don't think

you ought to say such things. As a matter of fact he had no more to do with Archie's going away than you had. What motive could he have for interfering between us?"

"Well, that's just it, you see: the motive stares one in the face. Everybody says he wants to replace Archie. Of course, I don't blame him for that."

"How noble of you not to blame him for these intentions of his which everybody knows about!" exclaimed Cicely, scornfully. "The only thing that you blame him for, it appears, is having kidnapped Archie—for I suppose you must think that Archie was kidnapped."

"Oh, that doesn't necessarily follow."

"Spirited away then, in some unexplained fashion. At all events, your sapience has persuaded you that Mr. Chetwode is a profound schemer. Well, since you take such an unselfish interest in my affairs, it is only fair that you should be told what Mr. Chetwode really is. He is about the best friend I have in the world. He has been kindness itself to me in all my troubles, and I can talk to him as I can talk to nobody else—because other people seem to be so hopelessly idiotic—and you may feel sure that I shall not cease to treat him as

a friend on account of the duplicity which you and 'everybody' have been clever enough to discover."

Cicely, who had a fine colour in her cheeks, was evidently much incensed, and perhaps it did not mollify her very much to be assured that the interest which Bobby took in her affairs was of a purely unselfish nature.

"In spite of what you say," he declared, "I don't believe you care for that demi-semi Russian, and I do believe that you care for Archie. I suppose I mustn't venture to call myself your friend; but I mean to act as your friend, if I can, all the same."

"I think you are very officious and very impertinent," Cicely was provoked into saying.

Thereupon Bobby apologized humbly enough. He said he could quite understand that he must appear to be both, and perhaps he ought not to have spoken out so plainly what was in his mind. Nevertheless, he could not retract his words. Time would show whether he was right or not.

"I hope," answered Cicely, "that if time shows you nothing else, it will show you the senselessness of listening to gossip and taking it for gospel."

There was no answer to be made to that well-merited

rebuke, and Bobby attempted none. He went into the house and had some tea and departed shortly afterwards, without having attained the object of his visit, except in so far as that Cicely's language had confirmed his previous suspicions. She had never said that she did not love Archie, and she had made it tolerably plain to a disinterested outsider that there was danger of her accepting Chetwode out of pique. The disinterested outsider was of opinion that such a calamity must be averted at all hazards.

CHAPTER VI.

BOBBY AS A DETECTIVE

In that mild autumnal season the Abbotsport fish-trade was very dull. The villagers, it is true, were in no immediate want, because, being of an amphibious nature, they had lately been doing a little work (which they hated) in helping to get in the harvest and had received the wages which were their due. Still rent-day was drawing near, and the herring could not be expected for many weeks to come, and there seemed to be no better use for an unemployed working man to make of his time than to lounge over the bar at the Seven Stars and discourse gravely about the many troubles and anxieties which beset all mortals in this hard world. Nothing lessens trouble so much as talking about it, and no one can talk upon any subject for an hour at a stretch without requiring to quench his thirst; so that if times were slack for some people, they

were busy enough for the landlord of the Seven Stars, a sympathetic person, and one who was ever willing to allow credit to such of his customers as deserved it.

Perhaps Mr. Coppard did not deserve it. At any rate, he had been given to understand that he would get no more of it, and thus it came to pass that that worthy man was seated in his own house one afternoon, with his elbows on his knees and deep dejection depicted upon his countenance. Not only had he, for the reason above mentioned, been foiled of his fixed purpose of getting very drunk on the previous evening, but, by a most unfortunate oversight, he had left a little hardly earned money upon the kitchen-table for a few minutes, where it had been found and promptly appropriated by Mrs. Coppard. Now this was an altogether irretrievable misfortune; for Mrs. Coppard, as her husband often told her, was "that thriftless" that whenever she obtained possession of any coin of the realm she immediately went and spent it. And now she had been buying boots for the children—as if anybody wanted boots at that time of year—and was proportionately good-humoured and exultant.

"Well, 'tis something to have put 'ee in a good-humour, anyway," observed Coppard, with gloomy phi-

losophy; "that's what don't come about more'n once in a blue moon."

Mrs. Coppard from the back kitchen, where she was washing the family linen, shouted out a rejoinder which was doubtless appropriate, but the exact terms of which were inaudible. After a time she came in and stood, with her bare arms akimbo, contemplating her melancholy spouse.

"I do really b'lieve as you got somethin' on your mind, Coppard," she said at length. "Want of liquor alone can't account for such downheartedness."

"Got the rent on my mind," grunted Coppard. "How be I to keep a roof over our heads when all my small savins goes to pay for your extravagances, I'd like to know?"

"A tea-spoon'd be too big for to hold *your* savins," returned his wife; "and as for rent, it's little you trouble your mind about that. Well, you know as Miss Cicely wouldn't see us turned out into the street."

Coppard sighed heavily.

"Miss Cicely," said he, "won't remain single for ever; 'tain't likely. And by the look o' things, I doubt but she'll get a 'ard man o' business for her 'usband.

That there Mr. Chetwode worn't born yesterday, nor yet the day afore."

"And you as couldn't find language powerful enough to praise him in not so long ago!" remarked Mrs. Coppard, with a contemptuous sniff. "As for me, I ain't varied, not from the first. 'None o' your slippery Rooshians for me,' says I. I'd a deal sooner see poor Mr. Harchie back, though I don't say as he beyaved very considerate to us. And I shouldn't wonder if you was repentin' already, Coppard, of what you done for to avenge yourself upon that young gentleman."

In saying this Mrs. Coppard was merely drawing a bow at a venture; but her husband's demeanour seemed to show that she had hit the mark. He raised his eyes, frowning angrily, and asked her what she meant by that, emphasizing his question with two or three strenuous adjectives.

"A man as comes 'ome fuddled with drink lets out more'n he remembers," answered Mrs. Coppard, darkly.

Now, the truth was that Coppard had not let out much; but for anything that he knew to the contrary, he might have let out a great deal, and the idea that he had betrayed himself naturally made him both frightened and wrathful. He was telling Mrs. Coppard

in grim and concise language what would happen to her if she hadn't sense enough to keep her tongue within her teeth, when his harangue was interrupted by the rapping of somebody's stick upon the door. This was immediately opened from without, and through the aperture was thrust the handsome face of Bobby Dare, who asked:

"May I come in?"

"Why, if 'tain't Cap'n Dare!" exclaimed Coppard, jumping up. "Come in, sir, and welcome. I did 'ear as you was back from the wars—and a terrible maulin' you've 'ad from them savages, they tell me."

"Not very terrible," answered Bobby. "I've got a bad arm; but that doesn't prevent me from steering a boat or holding a line, and I thought I should rather like an afternoon's fishing if you'd take me, Coppard."

Coppard assented readily. In the matter of payment he knew Mr. Dare to be animated by the feelings of a true gentleman, and he foresaw that it might yet be possible for him to spend an evening in congenial company at the Seven Stars. Moreover, he was not sorry to escape from his wife, who was an alarming person when irritated, and who, even at the best of times, possessed a remarkable faculty of worming

admissions out of those who would fain keep their own counsel.

In less than a quarter of an hour, therefore, this much-enduring bread-winner was seated comfortably in a lugger, which he had borrowed for the occasion (the owner being absent), while his employer, with the tiller under his arm, was holding a line over the side. As there was a fresh breeze blowing from the eastward, and as they were running before it, there was not much likelihood of Mr. Dare's catching many fish yet awhile; but the reader will scarcely require to be informed that Mr. Dare was not at sea that day for the purpose of catching fish. And presently he began in a cautious fashion to feel his way towards the attainment of his private ends.

"There have been great changes hereabouts since you and I were last in a boat together, Coppard," he remarked.

"You may say that, sir," agreed Coppard, shaking his head; "and none of 'em what you could call changes for the better neither. The old Squire, he's a sad loss to Abbotsport, and as to Mr. Morton, why, we don't know what he might ha' been if he'd lived. For we all has our faults, and we all looks to curin' ourselves of 'em in doo season."

"Well—yes; I suppose so. But as things have fallen out, you haven't much to complain of, have you? Miss Bligh will do all that her father ever did, I should think."

"You won't 'ear no two opinions in Abbotsport about Miss Cicely, sir. But what I feel, lookin' forrard a bit, is that we've got to count with a young lady now, 'stead of a young gentleman. And it's only to be expected as young ladies 'll marry."

"Oh, of course. And in point of fact she was very near marrying a man who would have managed the property admirably, I daresay. That was a curious affair—the engagement being broken off so suddenly."

"Very cur'ous indeed, sir," answered Coppard, briefly.

"I don't yet understand what the reason of it could have been," Bobby went on, ingenuously. "Being away at the time, I have only heard rumours, and rumours are very seldom trustworthy."

Coppard grunted an assent to the general proposition, but did not seem inclined to say anything bearing upon the particular instance; nor had further leading questions the effect of overcoming his reticence. He agreed that Archie's disappearance was strange, and

might even be considered unaccountable by some: he did not deny that it might have been due to causes which were as yet unknown to the public, and he said it was no doubt a pity that the property should be in danger of passing out of the hands of the Bligh family; but he would give no hint that he himself possessed more information upon the subject than the rest of the world. Under these circumstances, Bobby had recourse to persuasive measures for which no defence shall be attempted here. Drawing a flask from his pocket, he remarked:

"This easterly wind makes one feel as if it were January; a drop of whisky would do us both good, I think." He then swallowed a mouthful from the silver cup, and filling it up again, handed it to Coppard, who conscientiously emptied it with a sigh of appreciation.

"Have another nip?" said the Machiavellian Bobby; "that thing doesn't hold more than a thimbleful."

And when his invitation had been complied with he did not at once pursue the investigation with which he had made so little progress, but talked about the weather and the paucity of fish and one thing and another for a time. It was only when these topics seemed to be pretty well exhausted that he asked casually:

"What do you think of Mr. Chetwode, Coppard?"

"Well, sir," answered Coppard, whom the whisky had certainly disposed towards a less distrustful attitude, "betwixt you and me, I really don't know *what* to think of him."

"Of course you know what people say—that he is making up to Miss Bligh."

"I wouldn't swear as people was makin' any great mistake there, sir."

"And there seems to be an idea—though I daresay it's quite an unfounded one—that he had something to do with getting Archie Bligh out of the place. You had better finish that whisky, Coppard; you look chilled. As for me, I have been so thoroughly baked in the tropics that cold hardly affects me. Yes; that is one of the rumours that I have heard."

After draining the flask to the dregs, Coppard ruminated awhile with much seriousness. Coppard had a conscience, and of late it had been causing him a good deal of uneasiness; because further acquaintance with Mark Chetwode had not improved his opinion of that gentleman. That Mr. Chetwode loved Miss Cicely with an unselfish affection now seemed to him to be doubtful. However, the man was a masterful man and might

easily prove to be a hard landlord. Finally, he had never given any money at all to one who had rendered him the greatest assistance; and this, to say the least of it, was ungrateful. Still the danger of betraying him was too great to be faced by an honest man who wished to keep out of prison. What might be done, and perhaps ought to be done, was to put Bobby on the scent. If that course of action should eventually lead to the retirement of Mr. Chetwode, well and good. If not, a sincere well-wisher of Miss Cicely's would at least have done all in his power to promote her welfare.

He accordingly said:

"Well, sir, that's a hidear as has occurred to some who ain't no fools."

"Including yourself, perhaps?" suggested Bobby.

"Thank'ee, sir, though maybe I don't deserve the compliment. But, to be sure, it don't want a deal o' wisdom to see 'twas Mr. Chetwode's interest to get t'other young gentleman out of the way."

"Just so. The only question is how did he contrive it?"

"Ah," said Coppard, "there, sir, you have me, I'll allow."

"I suppose you can't think of any way in which the thing might have been done."

Coppard was sorry to say that he really couldn't. Notions had come into his head; but Captain Dare would understand that some notions were best not put into words,

"Oh, I'm not asking you to put anything into words, except what you know," said Bobby. "I don't mind telling you that I am very anxious to get at the bottom of this mystery. Miss Bligh and I are old friends, and I shouldn't like her to fall a prey to a fortune-hunter, if any efforts of mine could prevent it."

"'Tis sailin' a bit near the wind," thought Coppard to himself; "howsomever I'll risk it." And he said: "If you should ask me, sir, I believe you couldn't do no better'n go straight to Mr. Chetwode and charge him with what you think he done. Press him 'ard, sir, and you'm bound to get a hanser out of him. I don't say but what he may have knowed somethin' to Mr. Harchie's disadvantage; but if he did, that don't excuse him from makin' a mean use of his knowledge, you see, sir."

More than this could not be coaxed out of Coppard; but it was obvious that he knew more and that pressure might subsequently be brought to bear upon him, if

necessary. Coppard's own forecast of what would happen was that Mr. Chetwode, when accused of having brought about Archie's removal, would simply say: "Well, what if I did bring it about? What if I know him to be the murderer of Miss Bligh's brother?" "You'll have to prove that," Bobby would rejoin; "and even if you can prove it, it isn't over and above likely that Miss Bligh will marry the informer." Thus Mark might be checkmated, and Archie, being guilty, would not venture to return, and fixity of tenure might be assured for a certain length of time to those who owed rent to an unmarried lady.

Bobby acted upon the advice offered to him because it accorded with his own ideas of straightforwardness. After he had been put ashore, he shaped his course for Upton Chetwode, and as he was nearing the house he overtook Mark himself, to whom he said:

"I was going to call upon you. I rather want to have a talk with you, if you'll allow me."

"I shall be charmed," answered Mark, urbanely.

"Well, I am not sure that what I have to say will be exactly charming; but perhaps you'll excuse my saying it. The fact of the matter is that I believe you can tell

me, if you choose, more than I know at present about Archie Bligh."

Mark shrugged his shoulders and laughed.

"How much do you know at present?" he inquired.

"I know what everybody knows, that he has absconded; and I know that no satisfactory reason has been given for his doing such an improbable thing."

"And you think that I can give you a satisfactory reason? Well, it is true that, so far as I know, I was the last person whom he saw in Abbotsport. He came to my lodgings the night before he left, and told me that he had made up his mind to go away and to break off his engagement to his cousin."

"Without offering an explanation."

"I am not prepared to repeat all that passed in the course of a confidential interview. I may have received hints and I may have formed conjectures. Other people, as you are probably aware, have also formed conjectures."

"Yes; but I am convinced that they are false. And I imagine that you know they are false."

"Why should you imagine that, Mr. Dare?"

"I'll tell you presently; anyhow, I do imagine it.

Amongst other conjectures which have been made, it has been conjectured, you know, that you are—in short, that you are an admirer of Miss Bligh's."

"Ah, yes; that was sure to be said," remarked Mr. Chetwode, composedly. And he added, with a smile, "Do you know, I have heard the same thing said about you?"

"I suppose that must have been before I went away. I don't mind your knowing that I proposed to her and that she refused me; there's nothing to be ashamed of in that. But it is said—whether truly or not of course I can't tell—that you are thinking of proposing to her now; and that naturally gives rise to a suspicion that you may have had something to do with Archie's disappearance."

"A suspicion on your part or on the part of the neighbourhood generally?" asked Mark, still smiling.

"We'll call it a suspicion on my part if you like. I am ready to apologize if you can show me that there is no foundation for it."

"My dear sir, I am sorry that you should entertain suspicions which are neither flattering nor warrantable; but I must respectfully decline your invitation to prove a negative."

Bobby had scarcely expected that such an invitation would be complied with; but he had another shot left in his locker, which he now fired.

"I've just been talking to old Coppard," he said, suddenly.

Mark could not exactly be said to start; but there came an expression of alertness and inquiry into his face which showed that the statement was not without significance to him. He said:

"Coppard, the boatman? Yes?"

"I have reason to think that Coppard is in possession of information which he hasn't seen fit to impart to me However, I got something like an admission from him that you could tell me what I want to know, if you chose."

Mark at once saw the danger of a direct denial. He answered:

"I might question your right to catechize me, Mr. Dare; but I won't do that. I will only take the liberty of warning you that you are meddling with matters which it would perhaps be better, for everybody's sake, to leave alone. Personally, I may say that I have nothing to fear from any inquiries or discoveries that you may make, and you must pardon my refusing to say another word upon the subject."

To this determination he politely adhered, notwithstanding Bobby's somewhat maladroit efforts to squeeze him. Nevertheless, the latter did not go away discomfited; for he now considered it to be beyond a doubt that Mark Chetwode had been concerned in Archie's mysterious exit, and that same evening he wrote a long letter to his former rival, in which he said, amongst other things:

"It is perfectly clear to me that Chetwode has scared you out of the place for purposes of his own, and if you don't come back at once and face the trouble, whatever it may be, he will most likely succeed. I haven't an idea what you have done, or are supposed to have done; but I daresay there aren't a great many men who would like the whole history of their lives to be told to the woman whom they love, and I don't believe that there are many women worth anything who wouldn't be willing to forgive and forget the past. I mustn't presume to answer for Miss Bligh; but my impression is that she cares a good deal more for you than she does for that cold-blooded beggar. All the same, it isn't a bit unlikely that she will marry him if you don't come back and stand up for yourself."

This persuasive epistle Bobby despatched to Archie's

club, the address of which he had obtained from Mr. Lowndes, and it may be hoped that after laying down his pen he experienced the reward which virtue is said to carry with it. For he himself was no whit less in love with Cicely than he had always been, and although he was strenuously opposed to her marrying Mark Chetwode, it could not be an unmixed pleasure to him to see her married to anybody else.

CHAPTER VII.

ARCHIE IS MADE TO WAIT

IMMEDIATELY after his arrival in London, Archie presented the letters of introduction with which Mark Chetwode had been kind enough to supply him, and met with a reception which was, upon the whole, as friendly as he had any right to expect. If he had not been utterly reckless and indifferent, he might have thought twice before placing himself without reserve at the disposal of persons whose appearance and manners were scarcely such as to inspire unlimited confidence; but he really did not care in the least what became of him, and, as he told them, the more dangerous the service upon which they might see fit to employ him, the better he would be pleased. There were a good many of them; they were of both sexes, and apparently of almost every social grade; it did not strike him that they were very much in earnest, nor was he greatly impressed by

the patriotism to which they laid claim. Still, the ceremony of his initiation was impressive enough, and they all agreed in assuring him that stirring events were at hand. If danger was what he wished for, they said, there was every probability of his wishes being gratified before long. He gathered that there was going to be a simultaneous rising in Bulgaria and Montenegro, that the King of Servia was to be deposed, and that an outbreak in Macedonia might be counted upon as certain to follow; but his informants were chary of details—indeed he suspected that they themselves did not possess very accurate information—and he was somewhat curtly instructed to await orders and refrain from superfluous questions.

What seemed to give his fellow-conspirators a more favourable idea of him than they had entertained at the outset, was the discovery that he had plenty of ready money. When it was made clear to them that he was prepared, not only to pay his own expenses but to make a handsome contribution to the general fund, they became quite pleasant and good-humoured, and some of them even went the length of advising him to remain where he was for the present. That was evidently what they proposed to do, and they pointed out that there are

many better ways of serving a good cause than dying for it. But Archie, who wanted to die—or at all events thought that he did—confessed candidly that he had no predilection for one cause rather than another, and begged that he might be despatched without delay to any place in which fighting was likely to occur.

"In the way of fighting I may be of some use to you," he said; "but I doubt whether you'll find me much of an acquisition in any other respect. Diplomacy isn't in my line."

It was a relief to him when at length the desired marching orders reached him, though these were not quite as precise as he could have wished. He was to proceed to Athens and there await further instructions. His ultimate destination might possibly be Salonica; but this was uncertain. At any rate, efforts would be made to procure for him the command of a body of irregular cavalry. He was, however, reminded at the last moment of the obligation which he had taken upon himself, and was cautioned that he had no right to select the manner of his employment. That was a point for the decision of his superiors.

Probably very few people know what despair means, and it may be surmised that a man who is literally

despairing almost always puts an end to himself. This was in point of fact what Archie intended to do; for he was resolved not to survive his first battle, and in the meantime he felt that he was to all intents and purposes dead already. He was not conscious of being particularly miserable, though he was never free from a dull pain about the region of the heart. He managed to eat and sleep; the only strong emotion that he experienced was one of impatience, and his only dread was that he might be severely wounded without being killed outright. The long journey to Brindisi reminded him every now and then that he had traversed the same ground under very different circumstances on his return from India; but the memory caused him very little pain. The Archie Bligh of those days seemed to him to have been a youth whom he had once known intimately, but in whom he no longer felt much interest. He was sorry for the poor fellow to whom fate had been so exceptionally cruel; yet he scarcely identified himself with that luckless being.

And when he had taken his passage from Brindisi on the Austrian Lloyd's steamer, and the snow-capped summits of the Acroceraunian coast came in sight, and later on, when he sat on deck staring moodily at the

olive-groves and vineyards and the sunny slopes of the Ionian Islands, and later still, when the Gulf of Corinth had been entered and the bare, purple mountains of the Peloponnesus rose in jagged outlines against the southern sky, neither the scenery nor the exquisite colouring, nor all the associations that belong to that renowned land, availed to rouse him from his apathy. The impertinent little modern city upon which the majestic Parthenon looks down; the almost perfect Theseum, which he could discern from the window of the railway carriage; the columns of the fallen Temple of Jupiter Olympius; and Lycabettus and brown Hymettus and distant Pentelicus—all these interested him no more than the chimneys of Birmingham or Manchester would have done. To him Athens was but a halting-place on his way towards an inevitable goal, and all he desired was that his halt might be made brief.

However, he had to spend a restless week amidst those classic scenes; for the Russian gentlemen who received him, and who were civil enough, did not seem to know very well what they were to do with their recruit, nor could they tell him much about the projected rising. Doubtless instructions would reach

them in the course of a day or two, they said. Meanwhile, would he be so good as to behave like a tourist and avoid mentioning the name of Bulgaria to anybody? They were living, they explained, amongst people who were naturally hostile to their schemes, and any indiscretion on his part might render their position most uncomfortable. Consequently, a laconic behest which they received from Constantinople was no less welcome to them than it was to him. He was to report himself at the latter city, it appeared, and it was added that work would be found for him before long.

"Work means active service, I presume," said Archie, who was beginning to feel some uneasy doubts as to the reality of this mysterious campaign, but his colleagues could only shrug their shoulders and reply that they hoped so. Their business, for the time being, was merely to observe and report upon the state of public feeling in Greece; the plans of those in authority were not usually revealed to subordinates until the moment for action had arrived. At Constantinople, however, he would meet with more influential and better informed persons.

To Constantinople, therefore, he went, and if the persons to whom he duly presented himself there were

more influential than those with whom he had previously had to deal, they were also more reticent and a good deal more suspicious. To what race or races they belonged, Archie did not discover; but he gathered that some of them were Russians and some Bulgars. They could not or would not speak English, and it was in French—a language with which he was about as familiar as the ordinary British officer—that he had to reply to endless interrogatories. Again and again he was questioned as to his motives, and his reiterated answer that he simply wished, for private reasons of his own, to take part in some forlorn hope, was evidently not found satisfactory. As for the raising of that body of irregular horse of which he had heard, the black-browed, saturnine individual who was most active in cross-examining him, seemed to be faintly amused by the mention of such a project, but merely observed that Mr. Bligh would be told at the proper time what was required of him.

The proper time had apparently not yet come; for the only orders that Archie received were to attend occasional meetings in a dirty little back room in Galata, where lengthy discussions took place in a tongue unknown to him, and where his presence was

for the most part ignored. The hotel in which he had taken up his quarters was close, dirty, and evil-smelling. It was almost empty, for at that season of the year everybody who could escape from Constantinople had moved to the shores of the Bosphorus, and in order to avoid exciting suspicion, he thought it best to engage a dragoman and have himself conducted to St. Sophia and the bazaars of Stamboul, and the other sights which it is the duty of tourists to visit. It was weary work, and the dragoman was annoyed because he could not even pretend to take an interest in anything that was shown to him. He fancied, too, that his footsteps were dogged; though whether by an agent of the police or by an emissary of his fellow-conspirators he neither knew nor cared. Both were very welcome to keep an eye upon him, and if it should seem advisable to the latter to have him murdered, he had no objection.

But at length he fell in with one fellow-conspirator who cheered him up a little. This was a certain Theodori, a Greek or Levantine by birth, but a cosmopolitan by choice and force of circumstances, and, as it seemed, a trusted member of the Panslavonic Society. Theodori was a middle-aged man with a very

dark complexion, a good-humoured mouth, beady black eyes, and hair which was rapidly turning grey. He followed Archie away from one of the solemn meetings above mentioned, caught him up and addressed him in excellent English.

"All this is a bore to you, is it not, Mr. Bligh?" he asked.

"It is a great bore to be kept here in idleness," answered Archie. "I don't know what they are talking about, and I don't know what they mean to do. Sometimes I doubt whether they mean to do anything at all."

"Oh, they mean to do something; it is even possible that they may succeed in doing it. But they have many difficulties to contend against; not the least of which is that they have to count with people upon whom they can't implicitly rely."

"They certainly don't seem to rely upon me," observed Archie. "I rather think they have put on a spy to watch me."

"That is quite possible. You see, they do not know much about Englishmen, and you are rather a puzzle to them. I suppose I may take it for granted that you care for the future of Bulgaria just as much as I do—which is nothing at all."

"They appear to have confidence in you."

"Well, I have earned it. For many years past I have been concerned in every plot and revolution that has taken place in Europe; it is well known that I have no money, except what I receive in return for services rendered, and it is thought that I have generally earned my pay. Besides, I am free from scruples of any kind. You, on the other hand, have yet to win your spurs; and you must pardon these gentlemen if they don't feel altogether sure of you."

"I shall be very happy to show them that I can fight, if they will give me the chance," said Archie.

Theodori laughed.

"Ah, my dear sir, that is not a great thing to be able to do. I do not wish to depreciate your valour; but I have seen so much fighting in my time that I cannot attach any great value to fighting men. Physical cowardice in battle is not, believe me, a common failing."

"All the same," answered Archie, "I don't believe you will meet every day with a man who would rather be killed than not."

Theodori stood still under a lamp, lighted a cigar, and looked into his companion's eyes.

"Quite true?" he asked. "Not a figure of speech?"

"It is quite true," replied Archie, "that I am tired of life and that my only wish is to die."

The other contemplated him half ironically, half compassionately for a moment.

"I will report your words to the committee, if you like," he said. "They have not been very cordial with you, I know; but they are not wanting in humanity, and perhaps it is for your own sake that they have hesitated to employ you in enterprises which would almost certainly cost you your life."

"If so, their kindness has been entirely misplaced," Archie declared. "From the first I have always said that to lose my life was the very thing I wanted."

"Oh, well," laughed Theodori, "that is what a great many young people say."

He did not seem inclined to pursue the subject; but he returned to Archie's hotel with him, and drank two thirds of a bottle of champagne with evident satisfaction, and narrated amusingly enough many of the episodes of an adventurous life. Archie liked the man, who indeed had the kind of fascination which belongs to recklessness and unscrupulousness, and who seemed to understand the nature of his case pretty well without asking questions about it. The two became friends

after a fashion. They met every day, and Theodori, after vainly endeavouring to give the Englishman an insight into the *menus plaisirs* of Pera, found a horse for him and took him out for rides into the country.

Well, that horse was a great comfort to poor Archie. He was utterly miserable and sick at heart; he was without hope and beyond all possibility of consolation; yet dead though his heart might be, his body was still alive, and to feel a spirited animal under him made the blood course more quickly through his veins, whether he wished it or not. Theodori, cantering beside him, used to throw queer, scrutinizing glances at him from time to time, much as a doctor will scrutinize a patient, and almost always his examination ended with a sigh.

"My dear Bligh," he said, one evening, when they had drawn rein in the Sweet Water Valley, and were gazing down the Golden Horn, "does it not sometimes occur to you that you are a very great fool? Life is pleasant even to me, who am poor and friendless and growing old: what must it not be to you, who are young and rich, and have nothing the matter with you, except that you have been crossed in love! Oh, I allow that it hurts very much to be crossed in love—it is worse even than a bad toothache—yet one survives it

and forgets it, as one survives and forgets everything. Do you know what I would do if I were you? I would embark on board the very first steamer that leaves this port for England, and I would stay in my own country for a good long time to come. People are not stabbed in England."

"You mean that if I threw our friends over and remained here, they would have me murdered?"

"There is no doubt at all about that."

"Then if the worst comes to the worst, I can throw them over. You don't know how I am situated, Theodori; there is really nothing for me to do but to die."

"For the sake of some woman, I presume?"

"Well, yes; but I am not simply the love-sick youth that you take me for. I can't tell you my story; only if you heard it, you would see that there is nothing insane in my wishing for death."

"It is a pity," said Theodori, musingly. And after they had put their horses in motion again and had jogged on for some little time in silence, he added: "You will get your wish, I think. These men, who probably seem to you a vapouring set of fellows, with more bark than bite in them, are quite in earnest, and they have some dangerous work to do. They are kind

enough to say that I am too valuable to be sacrificed, otherwise I imagine they would have employed me."

"In what way?" asked Archie, quickly.

"That I should not be allowed to tell you if I knew. But I don't know. I merely guess. You and I have only to obey orders, with an encouraging certainty of being put to death if we are insubordinate. After all, that simplifies matters very much, and relieves one of all sense of responsibility."

"Yes," agreed Archie, rather hesitatingly; for his companion's remarks had suggested an unwelcome idea to him. Presently he asked: "Would you assassinate a man if you were ordered to do it, Theodori?"

"Oh, dear me, yes! Why not? In the first place, I should be compelled to do it; in the second place, the man would probably deserve it; finally, I have no objection to taking human life in cases of necessity. That is a principle which is universally admitted, you know. Thousands of lives are taken for the sake of altering a frontier-line; and it is only in quite recent times that civilized nations have given up executing their criminals for theft."

"Still, I suppose you wouldn't like to be an executioner?"

"Not for choice," answered Theodori, laughing. "However, I have never been ordered to execute anybody, and I daresay I never shall be."

He put his horse into a gallop, and no more was said until they entered the streets of Stamboul. Then he would talk about nothing but the charms of a certain singer whom he had seen the night before at a *café-chantant*, a subject which possessed no interest for Archie. But after crossing the Galata Bridge, where they parted, he said suddenly:

"You won't take my advice and ship yourself off home, then?"

Archie shook his head.

"That is impossible!" he answered.

"Well," said Theodori for the second time, "it is a pity. Good-night."

CHAPTER VIII.

THEODORI DECLINES A FORTUNE

It was probably in consequence of favourable reports received from Theodori that Archie's distrustful masters became more friendly with him, and assumed a less guarded attitude when he was present at the councils. Some of them began to address him in his own language, with which they appeared to be somewhat better acquainted than he was with any foreign tongue, and through them he learnt something of the alleged position of affairs in Bulgaria. The people, he was told, were thoroughly dissatisfied with their present ruler, and dreaded the inevitable results of the policy that he was pursuing; the clergy were against him to a man, and it was only in deference to the expressed wishes of certain exalted personages that a revolution had been staved off so long. What was certain was that the coming revolution would have a very different and much more decisive outcome than the last. And perhaps

it was in order to remove any patriotic misgivings which this Englishman might be expected to feel that so much stress was laid upon the perfect disinterestedness of Russia in the matter. Russia, he was assured, fully recognized the independent character of the races whom she had freed from the Turkish yoke, and there was no greater mistake than to suppose, as many people did, that the Bulgarians, by reason of their long enslavement, had not in them the makings of a nation. Another very great mistake was the time-honoured belief that Russia coveted Constantinople; and it was shown to him by arguments which he did not quite follow that the possession of that city would be a source of weakness, not of strength, to the great northern Empire which was charged with a desire to shift its capital to the shores of the Bosphorus. The infidel, it was true, would be eventually driven out of Europe, that was what every intelligent man must perceive; but it was desirable for the peace and security of all the European nations that a small State, guaranteed by the greater ones, should be placed in a position of such geographical importance. Well, the Greeks had been tried and found wanting; it was now the turn of the Slavs; and although the establishment of a Slav kingdom might

still be somewhat distant, England, not less than the other Powers, was interested in working towards that solution of the thorny Eastern question.

To all this Archie assented with a good deal of indifference. He could not have fought against his own countrymen, but there was not the slightest danger of his being called upon to do that; and as he was sure to be dead and buried long before a general war could break out, he felt justified in disregarding considerations of high politics. From what particular pattern of rifle the bullet might be discharged which would relieve him of all further participation in earthly quarrels did not seem to him to signify very much. Only he wished that his death-warrant might be made out with as little delay as possible.

One morning, his banker, whom he had been obliged to inform of his whereabouts, forwarded him a batch of letters, amongst which was the artless effusion penned by Bobby Dare. Archie was greatly touched by it; for he knew very well what the sentiments and aspirations of his correspondent had once been, and indeed no secret was made of these.

"I have loved Cicely Bligh ever since I was a small boy," wrote Bobby, "and I suppose I may look upon

myself as an unusual example of constancy; but she never took me seriously, and she never will. That doesn't prevent my loving her still, and wishing her to marry the man whom I believe she loves. If it is a race between you and Chetwode, I know whom I want to win."

Other extracts from this letter have already been quoted. Of course Archie could not be influenced by it; but it softened his heart, and brought the tears into his eyes, though he judged it best to return no answer.

"After all there are some really good fellows as well as a lot of consummate rascals in this wretched world," he thought. "Chetwode may be a rascal, and I shouldn't be much surprised if he was; yet I don't see how he could have dealt differently with me. If I had been in his place, I suppose I shouldn't have allowed Cicely to marry the man who had caused her brother's death. And if he wishes to marry her himself, he has a right to try. I don't believe she'll take him, though. I'd rather think of her as married to that honest fellow Bobby."

But even this prospect, somehow, could not be contemplated with any approach to cheerfulness or resignation. The unfortunate man was young and full of

health and strength. His feelings had been dulled by the terrible calamity which had come upon him; but time was beginning to do its work, and this well-meant missive acted upon him like an irritant, causing all his wounds to ache and throb with intolerable pain. He could not help asking himself whether it was possible that Cicely really loved him; he could not help wondering whether it was true that women, when they love, are willing to forgive everything. He could forgive her anything, he thought, forgetting that he had not been very ready to forgive her for desiring to manage her own property in her own way.

Upon the summit of the hill of Pera, near the British Embassy, there is a small public garden, whence a wide view of the city may be obtained. Thither Archie wandered, and, after reading his letter over again and replacing it in his pocket, indulged in dreams which he well knew to be only dreams. No! he could not now go back and "face his trouble," as Bobby advised; but there was no harm in speculating upon what might conceivably happen if he did go back. All sorts of happy and improbable events are conceivable, and perhaps we can't do better than console ourselves by conceiving them, because they very seldom come to pass, nor, even

when they do, does the reality often prove as pleasing as the vision. So for a time Archie pleased himself or pained himself—which it was he hardly knew—by imagining that Cicely's arms were round his neck and her head on his shoulder, that she was telling him she did not doubt a word of his story, and asking him how he could have been so cruel as to fancy that she would.

"Oh, here you are!" said a voice behind him. "They told me you had walked up in this direction."

"Who told you?" asked Archie, turning round. "The man who watches me?"

Theodori laughed.

"You do not like being watched?" he asked. "For my part, I am so accustomed to it that I don't mind it—indeed, I look upon it as a sort of protection. Well, if you never do anything worse than sit in a garden and gaze at a superb view, you will soon cease to be spied upon."

"I didn't know there was a view," answered Archie, dejectedly. "Now that you mention it, I daresay it is superb; but I think I would rather be looking down the mouth of a cannon. Is there to be a meeting to-night?"

Theodori nodded. He seemed to be a little nervous

and excited, and as he lighted a cigarette, while seating himself upon the bench beside his companion, it was noticeable that his fingers trembled slightly.

"Something has been decided!" exclaimed Archie, upon whom these signs of agitation were not lost.

"Well—I think so," Theodori replied; "but you will be told to-night. When all is said, it is what you asked for," he added, almost roughly.

"Death is what I asked for," said Archie, and it was with some surprise at himself that he experienced a sudden sensation of faintness. "I shall be only too thankful if it is coming at last."

"Oh, you fool!" exclaimed Theodori, "you poor, silly young fool! Do you know that you are as white as chalk? There!—never mind; I know you are no coward. And you must go on now—I can't save you. Ah, why wouldn't you be advised by me while there was still time?"

It may have been fancy; but there certainly seemed to Archie to be a suspicious humidity in the eyes of this middle-aged scamp.

"You have been very kind to me, Theodori," he said simply, "and you must not distress yourself about me now. It is quite true that death is what I asked for,

and death is the only good thing that anybody can give me."

"Well, you may come out of it safe and sound—who knows?"

"But that would be a little ridiculous, wouldn't it? No; if anything in the world is certain, it is certain that I shall not return from this expedition. By the way, what sort of expedition is it, and what are we supposed to be going to do?"

"My dear friend," answered Theodori, "you are aware that I am only an instrument, like yourself. I know very little, and what little I know I must not talk about. Only—I am sorry."

Archie looked at the man's face, which was not a bad sort of face, as faces go, and which just now expressed nothing but kindly commiseration.

"I didn't mean to tell my history to anybody," he said; "but I will tell it to you, I think. Then you may be as sorry for me as you please, but at least you won't be sorry when you hear that I have been killed."

So he related as succinctly as he could the chain of circumstances which had brought him to his present strait, and when he had finished, Theodori, who had listened attentively without interrupting him, said:

"You have been very unlucky, my poor boy; but you have also been unnaturally foolish, and I am afraid you have played into the hands of our friend Chetwode —*qui n'est pas sot, lui.*"

"Oh, I don't deny that I behaved like a fool," answered Archie, "although I couldn't suppose that anybody had seen the scuffle between me and my cousin. Anyhow, you understand now why it was out of the question for me to return to England."

Theodori assented meditatively.

"Yes, you are self-condemned in every sense; your story would never be believed after the way in which you have acted. Yet you might very well have lived on and been as happy as ever again in the course of a year or so. *Si jeunesse savait!* But it is useless to talk in this way; and, as I said just now, you may not be going to die this time."

"It will be no fault of mine if I don't," answered Archie.

"Well, you had better be prepared for it, at all events, and that is what I came up here to say to you. Have you any instructions to give me? Have you made a will?"

"I never thought about that," Archie confessed. "I

suppose, if I die intestate, my money will go to my cousin, who doesn't want it; perhaps I might think of somebody else to whom it would be more useful." Then he added, smiling: "I'll tell you what, Theodori, you shall be my heir. You aren't well off, you know, and you have often said to me that you dreaded the prospect of old age. With what I can leave you, you will be able to live comfortably and amuse yourself, and drop this conspiracy business."

But Theodori started back, throwing out his hands.

"Not for worlds!" he exclaimed, vehemently. "I wouldn't touch it! You think that is a funny thing for an unscrupulous pauper to say? But don't you understand that it is my fault—that it was I who—well, they questioned me about you, and I repeated what you had said. I wish to God I had held my tongue!"

"My dear fellow," returned Archie, "if you have made these people believe what I have been trying to drive into their heads all along, you have done me the greatest service in your power. Why should you object to my making some return for it?"

No representations, however, could overcome the determination of this inconsistent vagabond to refuse the fortune offered him.

"You must think of some other poor man," he said. "Heaven knows there are plenty of them! And when you have written out the document, you had better go to your Embassy or to your banker's, and have your signature attested; for obvious reasons it would not be very safe for me to act as your witness. Now I have no more to say, and I am going away. Till to-night, then."

So here was another good fellow, in the skin of an adventurer. In truth this world, sad and chaotic as it is, is inhabited for the most part by beings who are neither very bad nor very good, and the distance which separates the best of us from the worst is not so great but that we can join hands across it. Archie was going to leave this world and go he knew not whither; that much was certain and inevitable; so that there was no harm in his feeling a queer, yearning, brotherly sort of love for the fellow-sinners of whom he was about to take an eternal farewell. And possibly it may have been a half-conscious wish that somebody at least should think kindly of him after he was gone, that made him bequeath all he possessed to Bobby Dare. Bobby, at all events, had been kind and

generous to him, and Bobby, poor fellow, had neither money nor expectations. It was as good a way as another of disposing of one's cast-off clothing.

When Archie had executed his brief testament and had had his signature duly witnessed, he returned to his hotel, where he wrote a long letter to Cicely, in which he narrated the whole truth about himself. However, after he had finished it, he tore it up; for what was the use of distressing her? She would hear that he had been killed in battle, and she would be sorry for a time, and then she would be consoled. That was better than that she should remember him in connection with a tragedy which had ended in virtual suicide.

That night, as the doomed man entered the dingy little room in which he had spent so many weary hours, he saw that all eyes were turned upon him, and that in all of them there was an expression of curiosity and pity. Theodori appeared uneasy and gave him a quick glance, which he interpreted to mean that he must show no sign of being prepared for what was in store for him. He accordingly seated himself with his accustomed air of languid dejection, and as soon as

some preliminary business had been disposed of, the fat, bald-headed personage who usually presided over these deliberations, addressed him in slow, laborious English:

"Mr. Bligh, it has been determined to give you immediate employment. I am to tell you that the Society attaches great importance to your mission and counts upon your obedience. To-morrow—do you see? —you will take the steamer to Varna. On arrival, you will report yourself to M. Natchikoff, whose address is here written out for you. From him you will receive further instructions, upon which you will act without delay. Also he will tell you what measures it may be possible to take for your personal safety. I am to remind you—but that is perhaps not necessary —that, should you fall into the hands of our enemies, you are to die rather than make any compromising revelations."

Archie said he quite understood his orders, and immediately afterwards the conclave broke up. Everybody shook hands with him on wishing him good-night, which was a departure from previous custom. Theodori, from whom he parted at the door, declined his

invitation to accompany him home and smoke a cigar, answering hastily:

"No; not to-night, thank you. I detest farewell conversations. Nevertheless, I shall be on board the steamer to-morrow to see the last of you."

CHAPTER IX.

MUTINY

THE Austrian Lloyd's steamer which carried the mails from Constantinople to Varna, and which until recently afforded the only direct means of transit between the Turkish capital and civilization, was, as it usually is, inconveniently crowded, and Archie, on taking his passage, was warned that all the available berths had been bespoken long before. However, the weather was fine and still, and he was quite willing to take his chance of a snooze on deck. There are circumstances which deprive even sea-sickness of its terrors, nor can it greatly signify whether one dies with or without a cold in one's head. Archie leant over the side and watched, though he scarcely saw, the embarkation of the passengers, which was being effected from small boats amidst that hubbub of shouting, shrieking, and chaffering familiar to all who have visited eastern and southern ports. He was wondering whether Theodori

would keep his promise of coming to say good-bye, and hoping that he would, although it seemed far more likely that he would not. For Theodori made it a rule never to incur any discomfort that could be avoided. He had to put up with so many compulsory discomforts, he was wont to say, that he would feel it unfair to himself to add voluntary ones to their number, and of course it is an uncomfortable thing to take leave of a man who has been sentenced to death.

But at the last moment, when Archie had quite given him up, he hove in sight, and, jumping out of the kaïk which had brought him, ran briskly up the companion-ladder. And evidently he did not intend that his farewell should be of any solemn or emotional character.

"Well, old fellow," he said, cheerfully, "so you've done with this deadly-lively place—and not sorry for it, I daresay. You're going to have a splendid passage. Got everything you want?"

"I suppose so," answered Archie, smiling. "My wants are not numerous. I'm sufficiently armed, if that is what you mean."

"Oh—well, yes; that's desirable, of course. They take very good care of you on board these steamers:

you'll get a better dinner than you could get at that filthy Pera hotel."

But although he went on talking in this way, as though his friend had been merely starting upon a pleasure excursion, it was easy to see that he was not thinking much about what he was saying, and he kept glancing towards the bridge, where the captain had already stationed himself, and whence orders might be expected at any moment that all who were for the shore should disembark. When at length those orders were issued, and when a general movement in the direction of the side had begun, his manner suddenly changed.

"Bligh," said he, taking Archie by the hand, "I don't think we shall ever meet again in this world, and if there is another world somewhere, it isn't very likely that you and I will be quartered in the same part of it. So now there are three things that I should like you to remember, if you can. Firstly, that I am not a free agent; secondly, that I tried to persuade you to go home—and it would have been a ticklish business for me if you had consented, I can tell you; thirdly, that I wouldn't take any legacy from you, though nobody wants money more badly than I

do. Bear all this in mind, and perhaps you will be able to say to yourself, 'Well, the man wasn't altogether a scoundrel, after all.'"

"My dear fellow," answered Archie, "I have had nothing but kindness from you from first to last; and if you mean that it was you who got me told off for this job, whatever it may be, I can only say, as I said yesterday, that you couldn't have done a kinder thing."

"Well—and there was something more that I wanted to remind you of. You have bound yourself to be obedient, and you will have to stick to your word. You must think of your superiors as you used to think, I suppose, of some old red-faced English general. It wasn't for you to criticize his tactics, though you might not approve of them. Your duty was simply to do as you were told; and that is your duty still. When you have seen Natchikoff, you will understand what I mean: nothing short of a miracle can save you. Good-bye."

He was gone before any rejoinder could be made, nor, after he had once more seated himself in his kaïk, did he turn his head, though Archie watched him out of sight and was ready to give him a last wave of the

hand. Archie himself was not in the least disturbed by that clear intimation that the end of his life was near. He had understood as much from the outset, and, except during that passing moment of physical weakness which has been mentioned, he had not shrunk from his fate. As the vessel moved slowly out of the harbour and then began to steam ahead at full speed between the sunny shores of the Bosphorus, his feelings were rather of peace and relief than of anxiety. A soldier's death is surely the best of all deaths, and many an unhappy wretch who is driven to blow his brains out would welcome it thankfully enough. Besides, anything is better than suspense.

The weather fulfilled its fair promise; the tempestuous Black Sea was found to be in one of its rare moods of quiescence, and at break of day the steamer cast anchor in the roadstead of Varna. Archie, who had passed the night on deck, dozing at intervals, saw a line of low, bare hills, dotted over with white houses, which the first rays of the rising sun threw into relief. He and the other passengers were placed on board large, heavy boats which might almost be called lighters, and, as they were being pulled slowly towards the unprotected shore, he thought to himself what a

pleasant time they would have had of it in an easterly gale. On the jetty a crowd of some thirty or forty persons was assembled, and as soon as he stepped on land one of these, a perturbed-looking little man with a waxed grey moustache, singled him out.

"Mr. Bligh?" he said, interrogatively, as he raised his hat.

"That is my name," answered Archie. "Perhaps you are M. Natchikoff?"

"Yes, yes," answered the little man, hurriedly. "You have arrived early; you have abundance of time before the train starts. What luggage have you? Only that bag? So—that is well! You had better walk up to the railway station with me. I would invite you to breakfast at my house; but the circumstances are such—you understand? For the sake of my family, I must not risk it."

He spoke very fair English; but he was in such a state of nervous excitement that it was impossible to get any intelligible information out of him.

"There is no hurry—there is no hurry!" he kept repeating, in answer to Archie's requests for instructions. "I have a paper for you which I will deliver to you presently, when we shall not be observed, as we are

now. It is most unfortunate that so many people have seen us together. Yet it was better that I should meet you than that you should ask your way to my house. And I would wager that those people at Constantinople have done nothing to ensure my safety. You have not brought a letter of introduction to me from your Embassy—no?"

"Of course not," answered Archie, smiling at the idea.

"I thought not! Such a simple precaution, and so easily taken! Many Englishmen bring introductions to me; I show them the neighbourhood and the site of the British camp before the Crimean war. That is quite natural. But those people treat me like a dog; they have no consideration for me."

It was evident that M. Natchikoff was a good deal more preoccupied with his own affairs than with those of his charge. His complaints were prolonged without intermission until he had reached a secluded spot, a long way from the railway station, when he cautiously drew an envelope from his pocket and thrust it into Archie's hand.

"There!" said he, "that will tell you what you have to do."

But, as Archie was about to break the seal, "No! no!" he almost shrieked; "I will not have it—I will not permit it! I desire to know nothing of the contents of that letter; you will be so good as to open it after you have entered the train and started on your journey."

"Very well," answered Archie, rather amused; "but at least you will have to tell me for what place I am bound. Because I don't know."

"For Rustchuk, of course. Is it possible that they did not inform you of that?"

"They informed me of nothing; I only know that I have been honoured with a commission which is likely to cost me my life. Perhaps, as we are quite alone, you would not object to saying whether you think that a general rising in the country is at hand."

"A rising? That may be—or again it may not be. We get no direct news from Sofia here, and I am not instructed to say anything to you upon the subject. But," added M. Natchikoff, with marked reluctance, "I was to ask you whether you had provided yourself with a revolver?"

Archie pulled up his waistcoat and showed the weapon which was attached to his belt.

M. Natchikoff drew a long breath of relief.

"Then I am not under the necessity of furnishing you with firearms," he observed. "It was a very dangerous thing to ask me to do—very dangerous, and very inconsiderate on the part of those who suggested it. Now, as to that letter; it must be altogether destroyed. I suppose—perhaps you would not like to swallow it, after reading it?"

"Well, if you ask me, I don't think I should," replied Archie. "Moreover, if there are other people in the railway carriage, as there probably will be, they might think it a little odd that I should make my breakfast upon my correspondence, might they not?"

"Then your best plan will be to burn it; many people burn their letters. In any case, it should not be allowed to exist for one moment longer than is absolutely requisite. Now, sir, I have performed my duty, and I must appeal to your good feeling to excuse me from accompanying you to the railway station. I am a married man, with a large family which depends entirely upon me for support; I hold at present a small office under the Government, and——"

"Oh, *I* don't want you to accompany me," broke in Archie, rather uncivilly—for he thought that con-

spirators and revolutionists ought at least to be free from poltroonery—"if you will point out the way to me, I have no doubt I shall be able to follow your directions."

M. Natchikoff at once agreed, and, after doing as he was requested, vanished with amazing rapidity. Archie got a cup of coffee and some dry bread in the scantily provided refreshment-room, and then took his seat in the train, where, as he expected, he was soon joined by half a dozen other travellers. Taking stock of these gentlemen, he came to the conclusion that, whatever their respective vocations might be, they were not detectives; so that as soon as the so-called express had started on its deliberate journey, he drew the envelope which M. Natchikoff had given him out of his pocket and tore it open.

It contained a half-sheet of type-writing, which was without date or signature, but which stated its purpose in language devoid of any ambiguity. When Archie had read it through, he fell back in his seat and the colour left his cheeks. He was not exactly surprised: because he had had suspicions which he had endeavoured to put away from him. Nevertheless, he was horrified and disgusted. For it seemed that there

was no question of a *coup de main* at Sofia or elsewhere, and that his services were required, not as a leader of irregular cavalry, but as a simple assassin. There was a man in Bulgaria whom he had often heard mentioned in the course of those Constantinople conferences which had wearied him so profoundly, and whose name he had seen more than once in the English newspapers. In foreign countries, this man passed, rightly or wrongly, for being an honest patriot. He was, however, notoriously anti-Russian in his sympathies, and it had been decided by those best qualified to judge that his "removal" was a matter of urgent necessity. Archie, therefore, was instructed to remove him; and the manner in which this act of justice was to be accomplished was set forth clearly and tersely. The man was to be at Rustchuk that afternoon; he was expected to deliver a speech on laying the foundation-stone of some new public building. It would be easy enough to approach him either during or after the ceremony, nor would there be any difficulty about putting half a dozen bullets in his body. For the instrument of Nemesis to effect his own escape would, it was admitted, be rather difficult; still it was not impossible that he might slip away in the confusion,

and he was told whither to betake himself in the event of his contriving to elude the police and the populace. Finally, he was cautioned that, if captured, he was to refuse to say a word in answer to any questions that might be put to him.

While Archie slowly tore this document into small pieces and dropped the fragments, one by one, out of the window, he reflected upon his position, and tried to arrive at some decision as to the course which it behoved him to adopt. One thing was quite clear and certain; he could not obey his orders. It is true that he had sworn obedience; but he had never intended to swear that he would disgrace himself; and when one has to choose between breaking one's oath and committing a cold-blooded murder, there is noting for it but to break one's oath. He now understood Theodori's compunction and self-reproach.

"What infernal blackguards these fellows are!" he thought indignantly. "I daresay they haven't the slightest objection to stabbing an enemy in the back; but surely, if they had a grain of intelligence, they might know that a gentleman doesn't do such things."

Well, there was no use in getting angry about it; the question was, what was to be done? Of course,

the hope of meeting with a soldier's death must abandoned; probably there had never been any chance of its being fulfilled.

"However," said Archie to himself, "they will no doubt have me 'removed' when they hear that I have played them false, and I am sure they are heartily welcome."

It was perhaps his duty to return to Constantinople and deliver himself up to his fellow-conspirators, to be dealt with as they might think fit; but he really did not feel that he owed it to them to take all that trouble. If they had not realized that he cared not one straw about them or their plots, they ought to have realized it. He had given them to understand that he was willing to die for them in any honourable fashion, and he was willing to be executed now if they should deem it worth while to execute him; only, in that case, they must be good enough to instruct some emissary to do the deed; he would, at any rate, not attempt to put himself out of their reach. As the train wound its slow way between the flat-topped hills of Bulgaria, he pondered over the total collapse of his scheme, and, in spite of himself, could not help a certain sensation of light-heartedness at the reprieve granted

to him by circumstances. It was as evident to him as it had ever been that there was no place for him in this world, yet possibly it may be true that

> No life that breathes with human breath
> Has ever truly longed for death,

and the knowledge that it was impossible for him to die in the manner that he had anticipated did not come to him altogether as a disappointment.

Shortly after midday the frontier town of Rustchuk was reached, and here the conductor of the Orient express came to ask him whether he wished to engage a place in the sleeping-car for Vienna.

"I daresay I may as well," he answered, with a short laugh.

Certainly he could not remain where he was, and he had decided not to retrace his steps. He, therefore, with the rest of the passengers, stepped on board the little steamer which was waiting, and presently he was transported across the broad, turbid stream of the Danube, no man forbidding him. It was a queer and even a somewhat comical thought, that at that very moment the intended victim was probably declaiming to an appreciative audience in happy unconsciousness of the peril he had so narrowly escaped, while certain

intriguers at Constantinople were rubbing their hands and saying to one another that all ought to be over by now.

From Giurgevo, on the Roumanian bank of the river, Archie despatched the following brief telegram to Theodori:

"Impossible to do as requested. Did not bargain for such business. Am going to the Grand Hotel, Vienna."

That he considered to be a sufficient explanation of his conduct and intentions. If these people should think it desirable to wreak their vengeance upon him, they would now know where he was to be found; but he resolved to have nothing more to say to a set of cut-throats who took such good care of their own persons and committed their crimes by deputy.

CHAPTER X.

MR. LOWNDES'S LEGACY

It is but too rarely that unassuming merit meets with any recognition in this bustling world; yet every now and then one is gratified by hearing of exceptions to the rule, and all Abbotsport was gratified to learn that a certain wealthy old lady had bequeathed a sum of two thousand pounds to her cousin, the Reverend Robert Lowndes, as a small token of esteem and regard.

"Though what she can have meant by 'regard,'" observed the Reverend Robert, on imparting this pleasant intelligence to his wife, "I really don't know, considering that I haven't so much as set eyes upon her for the last quarter of a century. Now don't say that that accounts for it, Maria."

"It is an old trick of yours, Robert," returned Mrs. Lowndes, "to put words into my mouth which I should never have dreamt of using; and you have the same unfair habit in the pulpit. You accuse your hearers

(who can't answer you) of putting forward arguments that won't hold water for a moment, and then you triumphantly go on to demolish them. Far be it from me to deny that your cousin's regard for you would have increased if you had taken the trouble to call upon her once or twice in five-and-twenty years. Then she might have made it four or five thousand, instead of two, and we could have put up a nice memorial window to her in the south transept."

"With our actual legacy, we shouldn't be justified in going to that expense, you think?"

"Nobody could expect it. But what I do think we are fairly entitled to is a holiday, and a very small part of this windfall ought to enable us to go abroad for six weeks or two months, and travel comfortably. How many years is it since we were out of England?"

The Rector sighed.

"Upon my word I don't remember. Enough for me to have forgotten all I ever knew of foreign languages, anyhow, and you were never very fluent, except in your own, of which I admit that you have a fine command. Don't you think that, at our time of life, the Lakes, or Scotland, would be more suitable than Switzerland?"

"Who wants to go to Switzerland?" cried Mrs.

Lowndes. "We have been there once already—and it is about the only place that we *have* been to. No! I see at a glance what can be done without undue extravagance—Paris, South Germany, the Tyrol, Venice, and possibly Florence and Rome. I shall expect a new travelling costume when we start, and a plain but handsome dinner-dress on our return. Those two gowns are all that I ask for myself; the rest of the expenditure will be entirely for your benefit. You require a complete change of air and scene, Robert; you know you do. I wouldn't say anything about it so long as I knew that we couldn't afford it; but now I must insist upon your doing what is right."

"And how about one's neglected parishioners?"

"They will appreciate you all the more when they get you back again. Besides, none of them are in urgent need of you just at present."

Mr. Lowndes smiled, as he stroked his chin reflectively. He rather liked the idea of this proposed jaunt, and he felt he had earned it.

"Well," said he, "perhaps I might be spared for a few weeks; I'll think it over. But in all seriousness, Maria, there is one parishioner of mine whom I don't half like leaving, and that is Cicely Bligh. It strikes

me that she may be in urgent need of a word in season before long."

"But would she listen to it? I confess that I am out of patience with Cicely, patient though I am. She is as good a girl as ever lived in some ways; but any one more obstinate and opinionated I never met. If she chooses to marry that Chetwode man, she will do it—and it won't be for want of my having warned her that he is after her money. *My* conscience is quite clear in the matter."

"No doubt it is a great thing to have a clear conscience," agreed Mr. Lowndes. "I am not sure that mine would be clear if I didn't do all I could to prevent such a marriage. Somehow, I don't trust Chetwode, and I am by no means satisfied that he doesn't know more than other people about Archie Bligh's reasons for leaving Abbotsport."

"Oh, dear me,!" exclaimed his wife, "we all know what *those* reasons were."

"I am aware that you all think you do; but I am unable to adopt your views."

"That is because Madame Souravieff flattered you and bamboozled you. Everybody else saw through her."

"Well," said the Rector, musingly, "if I go away, I shall at all events leave one man behind me who has a head upon his shoulders. Bobby Dare sees as plainly as I do that the popular theory is absurd, and I think he may be trusted to keep a sharp eye upon our friend at Upton Chetwode. A good fellow that, and a loyal fellow too. It isn't every young man who would trouble himself to work as he is doing for an absent friend."

"Oh, he is working for an absent friend, is he?" said Mrs. Lowndes, laughing. "If he is, he must indeed be a paragon of a young man, considering that he himself is over head and heels in love with the girl."

"Do you think so?" asked the Rector, dubiously.

"Do I think so? My dear Robert, have I a pair of eyes? You, of course, have none—or at least you might as well have none, for any use that they are. Now I will just tell you this, and if you don't believe me, I shall not be surprised. Cicely never cared a button for her cousin; she doesn't care much for Mr. Chetwode, and she might come to care for young Dare if he were not such a simpleton. However, he will certainly ruin any chance that he may have if he lets her see that he is interfering with her affairs."

Perhaps that discovery did not imply any extra-

ordinary amount of shrewdness on the part of Mrs. Lowndes, and in truth Cicely had of late been greatly annoyed by the reports which had reached her of Bobby's activity and of the inquiries he had been prosecuting right and left. That he should dislike and distrust Mr. Chetwode was a comparatively venial offence, though he might have no adequate excuse for so doing; but it was taking a little too much upon him to assume that she wanted Archie to be dragged back by the hair, and in spite of her having said and wished that Bobby would get over his own boyish attachment, she could not think the better of him for having fulfilled her prophecy so expeditiously. She was, besides, the more provoked with her former adorer by reason of a certain respect which she could not help feeling for him. He was no longer a boy, but a full-grown man—very quiet, very resolute and self-reliant, after a fashion which was not inconsistent with modesty. He did not obtrude himself upon her notice, and as he never mentioned the subject, she could not very well tax him with the officiousness of which she knew him to be guilty. She did do her best to snub him; but this was not much of a success, and after one of her sharp speeches, somehow or other it was always she herself, not he, who felt small.

Now, what is to be done when a friend of whom better things might have been expected sees fit to conduct himself in an unpardonable manner? Obviously one must be driven to fall back upon such sympathy as may be obtainable elsewhere; and Mark Chetwode's sympathy was of a peculiarly soothing and delicate kind. It was evidently real; it was never put forward in the shape of unasked-for advice, and it could always be counted upon, even when it was not expressed. For Mark, who knew that he had no surer ally than time, was playing his cards very well indeed. He was under no illusion as to Cicely's feelings; he was aware that she was not in love with him and that she would undoubtedly refuse him if he asked her to be his wife; but he was also aware that she was beginning to rely more and more upon his support in a thousand little ways; and one great element of security was that, if she did not love him, she did not love anybody else. His object was to make himself indispensable to her, and he quite hoped that he was succeeding.

"I shall miss you dreadfully when you go away," she told him one afternoon.

They were walking across the park; for she had, as usual, encountered him in the course of her afternoon

walk, and it had come to be an understood thing that when this happened he should see her home.

"It is kind of you to say so," he answered, with a smile. "But am I going away?"

"I don't think you will be able to stay all through the winter; you haven't enough to occupy you. And you are not one of those men who can always be happy so long as they have plenty of sport."

"Added to which, I could not have it if I were. Nevertheless, I hope to remain where I am."

"Are you really growing fond of Upton Chetwode at last, then? I used to preach to you that it was your duty to reside upon your property, do you remember? But you didn't seem to be convinced of it, and now I am not sure that it is your duty after all. It can't be anybody's duty to bury himself alive."

"Shall I confess the truth?" he asked. "I hate Upton Chetwode, and I have a constitutional aversion to doing my duty. I suppose that if I were a sensible man I should be in St. Petersburg at this moment."

"Why?" asked Cicely.

But she obtained no answer, and possibly required none.

"I doubt," said Mark presently, "whether you could

find anywhere another man at once so hopeless and so contented as I am."

"I don't know why you should be either. It is absurd for you to talk of being hopeless; yet perhaps you have no business to be contented with the life that you are leading here. I think you ought to go out into the world again."

"Ah, then you shouldn't tell me that you would miss me if I did."

It was not often that Mark permitted himself such innuendoes, and he hastened to qualify his ejaculation by adding:

"I have very few friends. Most men, I daresay, would think it only natural that their absence should be regretted; but to me it sounds like an extravagant bit of flattery. Perhaps, after all, it is rather presumptuous of me to speak of you as a friend of mine."

"I should be abominably ungrateful if I were not your friend," Cicely declared. And seeing in the man's eyes a wistful look, which was not feigned, she was moved to speak with more warmth than was perhaps quite prudent. "I am like you," she went on; "I haven't many real friends. There is my aunt, who is

as kind as she can be, but with whom I have scarcely a single idea in common; then there is Mr. Lowndes, who treats me as if I were a wilful child; and there is Bobby Dare, who—who is tiresome and irritating in many ways. I think that must end the list, and you are the only one of the four who never rubs me the wrong way."

"That is something," observed Mark, laughing slightly. "It is a negative merit; but when one has no positive merits——"

"You have the positive merit of being straightforward," returned Cicely—and if this was not a very happy hit, it was at least effective, since it made her queerly constituted companion feel both grateful and ashamed—"you neither do nor say shabby things. You are not for ever suspecting your neighbours of unworthy motives, and I notice that when you dislike them you generally hold your tongue about them."

"Perhaps that is only because I am so worldly-wise, though. I have lived long enough to know what a worthless weapon calumny is; and if I wanted to prejudice you against—let us say—against our friend Mr. Dare, I don't think I should begin by telling you that in my opinion he was a scheming hypocrite."

This certainly seemed to be a temperate and dignified enough fashion of signifying that he was cognizant of Bobby's proceedings, and a comparison between the two men could hardly at that moment be to the advantage of the latter. Cicely did not say much more, for the subject was not an easy one to discuss; but she allowed it to be inferred pretty clearly that no calumnies would injure Mr. Chetwode in her estimation, and when she reached home, where Mr. Lowndes had been for some time patiently awaiting her return, she was not at all in the mood to be influenced by representations which that excellent man had felt that he ought to make to her before absenting himself from his parish.

"You don't give me credit for a grain of common sense!" she exclaimed. "Admitting that I can't see quite as far into a millstone as you and Bobby Dare, it still doesn't follow that I am an absolute idiot. If Mr. Chetwode harboured the designs which you are so kind as to attribute to him do you really suppose I shouldn't have discovered them by this time? And if he wanted to supplant Archie, do you think he would have considered it necessary to remove him from the place by fair means or foul?"

"Well, yes, I do," answered the Rector. "My belief

is that you would have remained faithful to Archie if he had remained faithful to you."

"Thank you; and perhaps you are right. You allow that he has not remained faithful, then?"

"No; only that he has been somehow or other made to appear false. It's no use talking, Cicely; nothing will ever persuade me that the poor lad threw you over for the sake of Madame Souravieff; and if that wasn't his motive, what was it?"

"It would be interesting to know."

"I think it would. And until I did know, I wouldn't accept another man out of wounded pride, if I were you."

It would hardly have been possible to say a more foolish thing. Cicely repressed her wrath; but she answered coldly that she was afraid she would have to use her own judgment, such as it was, in the matter of accepting or refusing any man who might honour her with an offer of marriage. All the more so, because the judgment of her advisers seemed to be a little cloudy, notwithstanding their singular ingenuity. And although Mr. Lowndes was morally certain that he was right, he could not produce an atom of proof in support of his allegations; so that all that he could do was to

shake his head and hold his peace, and trust in Providence.

"I don't wish to hurt your feelings, Robert," observed his wife, by whom he was duly catechized that night; "but I must say that it strikes me as a merciful thing that you are going to take your holiday just now. And if the Admiralty would find some employment for the other Robert and send him away, I daresay Cicely wouldn't marry Mr. Chetwode after all. It was right to warn her—I did so myself—but then I only told her that he was after her money, which is true, and ought to be obvious. I wasn't quite such a goose as to suggest that he had hatched some dark plot for disposing of young Bligh!"

CHAPTER XI.

ARCHIE'S SENTENCE

It seemed a strange and unreal thing to Archie Bligh that he should be crossing the plains of Roumania without molestation and in a comfortable railway carriage, like any ordinary traveller. He had become so accustomed to the sensation of being constantly watched that he could hardly believe there was no emissary of the Society to which he had sworn fealty at his elbow, and it was difficult to realize the facility with which he had refused the part assigned to him. Emissaries, to be sure, might be found in or despatched to Vienna; but somehow he could not think of these people very seriously or imagine them to be the desperate characters that they represented themselves as being. The solemn emptiness of those conferences at Constantinople, the ludicrous terror of poor M. Natchikoff, the evident lack of any concerted plan of action—all these things came back to his mind and produced a

strong impression therein that he would hear no more of insurrections or assassinations. And this was scarcely such a disappointment to him as it ought logically to have been. He had done his best to get himself killed: it was no fault of his that he had been unsuccessful, and now it only remained for him to devise some other means of getting rid of an existence which instinct or early training forbade him to take with his own hand. By hook or by crook he must manage to die; that was certain. Yet the prospect of a few weeks or even months of life was rather sweet than bitter.

He thought a good deal in a fitful, disconnected way, about the past and the future while the train sped on through Roumania and Hungary, and he slept during the greater part of the night. By daybreak he had pretty well made up his mind what he would do.

"I'll give them a chance to put me out of the way," he thought; "that is the least that I can do, after throwing them over. But if they haven't taken advantage of their opportunities at the end of ten days or a fortnight, I shall consider myself entitled to make a move, and I believe that India would be the best place for me. A man who habitually goes out tiger-shooting on foot ought not to defraud his heirs of their inheritance for

very long, and while he lives he will have grand sport to keep him from brooding over what can't be cured."

The remembrance that he had an heir made him remember Bobby Dare's letter ; and perhaps it was the fresh lease of life which he had taken that gave him a greater interest in that missive than he had hitherto felt. Could it be possible that Chetwode had deliberately recommended him for an enterprise which must of necessity prove fatal to the man who should carry it out? He recollected very well that he had spoken upon the subject of assassinations to Mark, and that he had received no assurance from that cautious personage that he would not be employed in such dirty work. But then he also recollected what Mark had said—that a girl could not be permitted to marry in ignorance the man who had brought about her brother's death. Mark was in any case free from risk of interference on the part of the luckless wretch in question ; so that there was no need to suspect him of sinister designs. Yet the fellow had a treacherous face ; it was horrible to think of him as Cicely's husband.

Archie determined that he would think no more about the calamity which he was powerless to avert—and, as a natural consequence, he found himself quite

unable to think about anything else. Meanwhile, time and the express hurried steadily on. Pesth was reached; then came the green meadows and wooded hills of Austria, and then Vienna and the end of the long journey. Archie installed himself comfortably at the Grand Hotel; one may as well be comfortable when money is no object and when one has the prospect of speedily relinquishing all one's earthly possessions. However, when he had spent three days in that bright city, which is in some sort the Paris of south-eastern Europe, and had neither received any response to his telegram nor been stabbed in the back during his nocturnal wanderings, he began to feel that the prospect had receded indefinitely, and to experience a return of the unreasonable exultation which had come upon him when he had first perused his instructions. He was well aware that there was not and could not be any hope for him; but for all that he was glad that he was not going to die immediately. He was glad, too—and this, at all events, was permissible—that he had freed himself from the stupid conspiracy into which he ought never to have blundered.

One evening he was sitting in the courtyard of the hotel smoking his after-dinner cigar, when a light touch

upon his shoulder made him start, and, turning round, he saw Theodori looking down upon him with a grave face.

"You here!" he exclaimed. "Did you get my telegram?"

"Naturally I did," replied Theodori; "that is why I am here. You have placed yourself and me in a painful position, Bligh."

"Sit down," said Archie, "and have a cigar. Well, if it comes to painful positions, you and your friends wanted to place me in a tolerably nasty one. I can't think how you can ever have imagined that I should accept it. I was perfectly ready to take part in any fair fighting, and I asked nothing better than to be killed in the course of it; but I suppose the fact of the matter is that fair fighting has never been contemplated."

Theodori had lighted his cigar. He blew three or four successive clouds of smoke from his lips before he replied:

"I believe that there will be fighting; but whether there will or not isn't a question for you and me. We have simply sworn to obey orders."

"No doubt; but you see, there are certain orders

which one *can't* obey. At least, I can't. All I can say is that your bloodthirsty friends have my full permission to assassinate the defaulting assassin. Only I rather question whether they have the requisite pluck."

Theodori did not smile.

"If you think that these men are merely conspirators *pour rire*, you are making a great mistake, Bligh," said he. "I do not know that they are all specially courageous; but I know that they cannot afford to be defied or disobeyed. It was not wise of you to send this telegram; you would have done better to travel straight through to England."

"Oh, very likely. But even if I had been anxious to preserve my skin, I couldn't have refused to let those fellows have a fair chance of making a hole in it."

"They will take advantage of your chivalrous sentiments," answered Theodori, dryly. "It is perhaps unfortunate for you, but it is certainly fortunate for me, that you happen to be chivalrous. I need hardly tell you that they hold me responsible for you."

"I am sorry for that," said Archie; "but I don't quite see what right they have to do any such thing."

"Well, as I told you at Constantinople, it was I who recommended you for this piece of work which you

have failed to execute. The thing had to be done—it still has to be done—and it wasn't easy at the moment to find a man who could be trusted to do it. For several reasons I regretted afterwards that I had mentioned your name; but I own that distrust of you was not one of them. I knew you wouldn't like it; but I believed that you would do it. Well, we need not argue about the righteousness or unrighteousness of assassination; you have your ideas and I have mine; neither of us would be likely to convince the other. But this is the offer which I have been sent here to make to you—and I beg you to believe me when I say that it is a great concession and one which I only obtained as a concession to myself. The man whom you were ordered to remove is now at Sofia; he takes no precautions, and by following him you can easily do what you ought to have done at Rustchuk. Your hope of escape, slight as it would have been in the first instance, will be almost nothing there; but that is your own fault. I am commissioned to give you this opportunity of atoning for an act of mutiny. Will you take it?"

"Most certainly not," answered Archie, composedly.

"If you don't, you will never leave this place alive.

Ridiculous though it may seem to you, it is nevertheless a simple fact that I myself shall be put to death unless I carry out the instructions that I have received, and those instructions are to make you obey or to kill you. They are not pleasant instructions; but that is neither here nor there, I shall carry them out, because I do not believe in any future state of being, and because I would kill anybody rather than die."

This was said in so calm and matter-of-fact a tone, despite the incongruity of such a declaration with the place in which it was made, Archie could not doubt the speaker's seriousness. He only answered:

"Very well; I shall offer no resistance. I can't think how you will manage it, though, even if I give you every help in my power. The Viennese police system is said to be the most perfect in the world."

"Ah, bah! It is not the police who will give me any trouble. Yet you might help me in one way, Bligh; you might consent to meet me in duel, instead of forcing me to murder you. I suppose you know that, although I would murder you if I felt it to be necessary, I should never be able to forgive myself for having done it. A duel is different. A distinction without a

difference, you may say; but to me the difference is as real as anything in this confused world."

To Archie the whole business seemed unreal enough. However, he assented without hesitation to Theodori's proposal, merely asking, with a laugh, what they were to quarrel about and where they were to find their seconds. Before replying, Theodori made a final and earnest appeal to him to reconsider his decision. A man who has sworn implicit obedience to others, cannot, he urged, be held answerable for any act that he may commit. The responsibility rests with his superiors; he is merely an instrument. Moreover, if death must be faced it is surely better to accept the fatal stroke from some stranger than to force an unwilling friend to deliver it. But these and other representations proved totally unavailing.

"Nothing on earth would induce me to obey such orders," Archie declared. "I am sorry that you should have a disagreeable duty to perform; but I can't relieve you of it. Now you may as well tell me what I am to do."

Theodori, who a short time before this had called for two glasses of beer, suddenly straightened himself in his chair and said in a loud, ringing voice:

"I will have no more to do with you, sir. You are a fool, and I believe you are also a coward." He added rapidly: "Throw your beer in my face!"

Archie promptly complied; and Theodori, without another word, rose and left the house, wiping his face with his handkerchief as he went.

There was a little stir and commotion among the spectators, two or three waiters came up, and presently the manager of the hotel advanced and stood staring in an undecided way at the Englishman, who continued to smoke his cigar imperturbably. Nobody, however, addressed him, nor, perhaps, did anybody feel that the incident was one which called for interference. Brawling, of course, could not be permitted; but these two strangers seemed disposed to settle their differences in a proper and decorous fashion.

Archie remained where he was, presuming that he would soon be informed what was the next step which he would have to take; and indeed he had not been waiting an hour when two very respectable gentlemen entered the courtyard, and, taking off their hats to him, presented him with their cards, which bore names of a Slavonic appearance. They had been informed, they

said, that he was without friends in Vienna, and it had been represented to them that they would render him a service by acting on his behalf in the unfortunate affair which had occurred between him and M. Theodori. Should he feel disposed to trust his honour to their hands, he might be sure that that flattering confidence would not be misplaced.

Archie had hardly finished thanking them before two more cards were handed to him, followed by their owners, Counts Petrowics and Paulowsky, who, it is needless to say, were the bearers of a challenge from their esteemed and grievously insulted friend M. Theodori. When they had been courteously received and duly referred to MM. Adreivics and Ivanovics, with whom it appeared that they had already had the pleasure of being acquainted, it was intimated to Archie that he would do well to await the result of the conference in his own room. He accordingly withdrew, and very soon afterwards his seconds joined him, with the information that their efforts to avert a hostile encounter had not been crowned with success. Consequently a meeting would take place in a secluded glade of the Prater at six o'clock the next morning. The

weapons chosen were pistols, and it had been agreed that only two shots should be exchanged. They said they hoped that that was satisfactory to him, and he replied that nothing could be more so.

Upon the whole, it was satisfactory to him—and yet he was sorry for himself. As he lay awake in the dark (for he only slept by fits and snatches that night) he thought of his short life, and the good times that he had had, and the follies and sins of which he had been guilty, which were not so very numerous. He thought, too, of Cicely, whom he had loved so dearly and who had loved him so little, and of Madame Souravieff and her perfidious sympathy, and of Mark Chetwode and his equivocal behaviour; and how could he help thinking that he was about to lose life and fortune and everything through a stroke of almost laughable bad luck? If he had clutched a tuft of grass, instead of seizing a tipsy man's legs, he would even now have been one of the happiest fellows alive. Ah, well! there is no denying that Providence or chance plays some queer tricks with the destinies of helpless mortals.

But Archie, if he was not a philosopher, was at all events a gentleman, and at daybreak he rose and dressed

himself, prepared to meet death, as every gentleman should. He found his seconds waiting for him outside the hotel with a hired carriage; he was driven with them through the silent streets and down the long alleys of the Prater, where the dew was heavy upon the grass and birds were twittering in the trees. Presently he was invited to alight, and was conducted on foot to a wooded dell where four men were standing, engaged in conversation. He recognized Theodori and his two friends, and somebody mentioned that the fourth person was a surgeon, at which announcement Archie smiled. The services of that functionary are not likely to be called into requisition, he thought.

The distance was measured out—surely it was a very short one! the antagonists were placed in position; then a handkerchief was dropped, and Archie instantly fired into the air. The next second he started, staggered forward a few paces, crossed his legs and fell heavily upon his face, with his arms stretched out before him.

A brief consultation followed between those who were legally responsible for what had happened. Theodori had burst into tears, as men of his nation-

ality are apt to do upon comparatively slight provocation; but he was not allowed to indulge his emotions long. His friends seized him, one on each side, and hurried him away, while the doctor remained kneeling on the grass, with his hand upon the heart of the victim.

CHAPTER XII.

MR. LOWNDES'S HOLIDAY

FEW things in the world are more discouraging than to find—as every unselfish person is sure to find sooner or later—that it is worse than useless to meddle with the mismanaged affairs of one's neighbours. Bobby Dare and Mr. Lowndes, animated though they were by the highest and noblest motives, had not made a striking success of their interference between Cicely and Mark Chetwode, and they were now feeling proportionately discouraged. Bobby, whose letter to Archie had, of course, remained unanswered, and who, despite all his efforts, had been able to obtain no further information bearing upon the mystery which so exercised his imagination, was almost in despair. He had the melancholy satisfaction of seeing Cicely on most days of the week, which was perhaps a shade better than not seeing her at all, but he was made to feel that he was in her black books, he was given no

excuse or occasion for speaking again to her as he had spoken immediately after his return, and possibly he would not have put in such frequent appearances at the Priory had he not been compelled in self-defence to make some show of continuing to pay his addresses to one by whom it was as clear as daylight that they would never be tolerated. For both his mother and his sister persisted in patting him on the back and telling him to go in and win. For the sake of a quiet life it was best not to argue with them, and for the same reason it was unadvisable to tell them—what, nevertheless, seemed pretty certain—that Mark Chetwode was going to have things all his own way.

Mr. Lowndes was not yet quite convinced of that, but he could not feel very sanguine as to his own powers of influencing the obstinate patroness of his benefice. Before handing over the control of parish matters to his curate, he thought it only right to seek another interview with Coppard and strive to relieve a troubled conscience of its burden; but Coppard, who had been sharply spoken to and thoroughly frightened by Mr. Chetwode, was now resolved to be guilty of no further indiscretions.

"Not me, sir," said he, when the Rector, after vainly

beating about the bush for some time, accused him in plain words of knowing more than he chose to tell about Archie's unaccountable abdication and flight. "'Tis well known as I ain't done nothin', nor yet wouldn't do nothin', to injure Miss Cicely—not if 'twas ever so! And what can have put such thoughts in your 'ead, sir, the Lord alone He knows. Which is what I often says to the missus after one o' your sermons, sir. They're too deep for the likes o' me!"

"I suppose that is why you so seldom give yourself a chance of listening to them. But you know, Coppard, however fond you may be of Miss Cicely, you had some reason, or fancied you had some, for bearing a grudge against Mr. Archie."

Coppard replied with a good deal of dignity that he was not that sort of man at all. It was very true that young Mr. Bligh had proposed to deal with him in a harsh and unjustifiable manner, but young Mr. Bligh was not his landlord and never would be. He could afford to disregard calumny, and he always did disregard it. Moreover, he really didn't know how a poor fisherman was to drive a rich gentleman out of the country even if he wanted to do such a thing.

Mr. Lowndes, not knowing either, had to desist from cross-examining this recalcitrant witness; but when he went to say good-bye to Cicely, he felt it his duty to try the effect of a last appeal upon her.

"I know I am going to make you angry," he said; "but I am old enough and wise enough not to care whether I make you angry or not. I can't leave this country without cautioning you once more that you are in danger of committing an act of folly which you will repent for the rest of your life. I am not denying your right to think what you please about Archie, and of course, until he vouchsafed some explanation of his behaviour, he had only himself to thank if you assume that he has fallen in love with another woman—although he hasn't. But now, I put it to you as a reasonable being: Is that a sufficient reason for your marrying somebody else, whom you don't really care for?"

"Oh, no, I shouldn't think so," answered Cicely; "but then I wasn't aware that I was going to marry anybody else."

"Well, my dear, you are thinking of it, and so is he. Mrs. Lowndes says you will do just what you choose, and I daresay she is right. All I implore of you is to

look well before you leap. Chetwode may be a trustworthy friend, though I confess that I am inclined to doubt it: but from friendship to love is a long step, and if you haven't taken that step yet, be advised by me and keep yourself well in hand while you can. We none of us know very much about him, remember."

Cicely, who thought she knew a good deal about him, did not consider it worth while to say so. In her heart of hearts she knew that Mark loved her; but how could she discuss the possibility of her accepting a man who had manifested no intention at all of proposing to her?

She, therefore, contented herself with remarking that she had no doubt whatever as to Mr. Chetwode's trustworthiness, and that she was well aware of how inevitable it was that any bachelor friend of hers should be set down as her suitor.

"It is a pity," she added, "that you can't manage to dislike him without bringing such far-fetched accusations against him; but that, after all, is a great deal more your affair than his or mine. Probably he would only be amused if he heard them."

Mr. Lowndes could say no more, and felt that he had

done unwisely in saying as much. It was with a heavy heart that he took his leave and with sad misgivings that he started for the Continent on the following day.

"I don't feel as if I should enjoy this trip a bit, Maria," he could not help saying out of the fulness of his heart to his wife, as he sat opposite to her in the railway carriage. "Cicely Bligh is as dear to me as if she were my own daughter, and I am afraid she is going to make the most fatal mistake that a woman can make."

"Would your staying at home have prevented that?" asked Mrs. Lowndes, pertinently. "One can't stop people from doing foolish and fatal things; it's only when the things are done that they come to us and ask for help."

"Yes," sighed the kind-hearted Rector; "and that is just what makes one doubt sometimes whether one ought to be thankful for existence. Our judgment is worth nothing where we ourselves are concerned, and we are powerless to save others, because they won't listen to us. My feeling is that, if I were what I ought to be, they *would* listen to me—and they don't."

But a man whose digestion is in good working order can scarcely contrive to be a pessimist, and when Mr.

Lowndes reached Paris he began to enjoy himself, notwithstanding the excellent reasons that he had for being in low spirits. It was very natural that so thorough a change of scene and surroundings should cause him to forget the worries connected with an English country parish, and, as a matter of fact, he was more oblivious of these than was his partner, whose sharp eyes were for ever restlessly searching the Rue de la Paix and the Rue de Rivoli and the gardens of the Tuileries in quest of somebody whom they could not discover. On the last day, however, Mrs. Lowndes's viligance was rewarded. She and her husband were driving back from the Bois de Boulogne, when near the *Rond-point* in the Champs Elysées they were passed by a smart victoria, in which was seated a lady whose features had recently become familiar to the inhabitants of Abbotsport.

"There she is!" exclaimed Mrs. Lowndes excitedly. "Look! Look!"

The Rector whisked round in time to see that the victoria had been brought to a standstill, and that Madame Souravieff was smiling and beckoning.

"Shall we go and speak to her?" he asked.

But Mrs. Lowndes had already answered the question by jumping out; and presently they were shaking

hands with their former neighbour, who expressed much surprise at meeting them there and a good deal of anxiety to hear any local intelligence that they might be able to give her.

The interview, which did not last long, was a rather disappointing one to Mrs. Lowndes, for all her queries and insinuations failed to elicit from the Russian lady the admission which she had hoped for. Madame Souravieff looked perfectly innocent when she was informed that Archie Bligh's friends were in perplexity as to what had become of him, and she had the effrontery to say that if, as they conjectured, he was abroad, she hoped he would come to Paris and find her out.

"All the same," Mrs. Lowndes declared, as she resumed her place in the fiacre beside her husband, "that young man is here. Of course she wouldn't take him out driving with her. I wish we weren't going away to-morrow."

"If you are right, Maria," answered Mr. Lowndes, "we should gain nothing by proving you so; and if you are wrong, as I think you are, we should do better to prosecute inquiries elsewhere."

But it was with little hope of hearing anything about Archie Bligh that this staunch friend pursued his

journey to Strasbourg, Munich, and other German cities, and when he reached Vienna, and took up his quarters at the Grand Hotel, he was less preoccupied with home affairs than with the questions of alternative routes to Venice and of whether the autumnal rains would have rendered the Tyrol an uncomfortable place of sojourn for tourists or not. He was sitting in the court-yard with a map spread out upon the table before him, in the very same spot where Archie had received Theodori's challenge, when he became aware of a stout, bearded personage, who, with straight legs and heels drawn together, was making him a low bow.

"The Reverend Lowndes, I believe?" said this Teutonic stranger.

Mr. Lowndes jumped up, ducked his head, and looked interrogative.

"Your name has been seen in the list of arrivals," went on the other, "by a patient of mine who is very ill in this house, and who would like to speak with you. He has begged me to seek you out and to mention his name—Mr. Bligh."

"Good gracious!" exclaimed Mr. Lowndes, "is it possible that you can mean Archie Bligh? What an extraordinary thing? Of course, I will go and see him

at once. You don't think him dangerously ill, I hope?"

The doctor shook his head.

"Your friend is more than dangerously ill," he replied; "his life cannot be saved. We have found it impossible to extract the bullet, and even if we could have done that, I do not think that we should have kept him alive. The left lung is perforated, and, what is worse, there is no vitality in the system. I fear he must sink in a few days."

"The bullet!" exclaimed Mr. Lowndes—"what bullet? How did he manage to get a bullet in his body at all?"

"Now—that is no difficult matter," answered the Viennese doctor, smiling. "He has perhaps trodden upon the foot of the other chentleman—what do I know? To me it was more important to get the bullet out than to ask how it found its way in; but, as I have told you, it was not possible to perform any operation."

"Oh, a duel, eh? Dear me, what a sad business? Who could have picked a quarrel with him? Some foreigner, of course. Not—not a Russian count, I hope?"

"No, not a Russian. I have understood that the

chentleman was a Greek, and that the affair was political; but this I cannot say certainly. My business was only to attend to the one who should fall."

"You were present at the duel, then?"

The doctor nodded.

"I was requested to be present; and I may tell you that I am sorry to have given my consent, for I have had trouble with the police about it. I have concealed nothing of what I know from them, and I will conceal nothing from you, sir; but I know very little. Until the day of the duel I was acquainted neither with your friend, nor with his adversary, and the other persons concerned in the affair have left this country for the present—it was only prudent on their part to do so. Mr. Bligh took no aim, he fired into the air, and at once fell, as we all believed, dead. But when I found that he still breathed, it was my duty to do all in my power to save him, and you may be sure that no measure has been neglected. Unhappily, our efforts have failed, and yesterday I was obliged to tell him that he must prepare for the end."

Mr. Lowndes sighed.

"It is a sad business," he said.

"Yes," assented the other, who seemed to have that

sort of kind-heartedness which so many Germans have, and which is not incompatible with considerable thickness of skin; "yes, it is sad to see any young man die. But from what he has told me, I think he is not anxious to live, and when one is not anxious to live——" Here the doctor raised his shoulders and spread his hands expressively.

"Has he spoken to you about himself and—and his affairs?" inquired Mr. Lowndes.

"No, he has spoken very little. I am not inquisitive, and besides, while there was any hope, it was necessary to keep him from talking. Now, however, it is of no consequence. Nothing can do him any harm, and I think he will die more happily after he has seen you. It was only by chance that I read out to him the names of some of his countrymen who had arrived at the hotel, and as soon as he heard yours he begged me to seek you out and send you to him. It is very possible that he may have something upon his mind, and that you may be able to relieve him."

"Ah, I'm afraid it's too late for that. Is there absolutely no hope?"

"Absolutely none. You would not perhaps understand me if I told you the medical details; but he is in

reality a dead man already. Will you come now to his room?"

"Of course I will," answered Mr. Lowndes; and so he was conducted upstairs to a bedroom on the second floor, the door of which was opened by a Sister of Charity, who closed it behind her and stepped out into the passage after the doctor had said a few words in German.

"We shall leave you together," the latter said; "you will be more at ease so. If anything should happen to make you want us, you will be so kind and ring the bell."

CHAPTER XIII.

LAST WORDS

Mr. Lowndes advanced into the room, where a man whom he would never have recognized as Archie Bligh was lying in bed, propped up by pillows. The unfortunate young fellow was as emaciated as if he had had a long illness; his beard had been allowed to grow, his cheeks were as white as marble, and his features had the pinched look which is the forerunner of death. He turned his head slowly and smiled, holding out his hand.

"Oh, my poor boy!" exclaimed the honest Rector, with tears in his eyes; "I would rather have lost my right arm than found you like this."

"You needn't be sorry for me," Archie answered; "it's all right. Everything has happened just as I wished, except that I wasn't killed on the spot; and now that you have come, I am very glad I wasn't. What a piece of luck that you should have turned up in Vienna, of all places, at this moment!"

He spoke with some difficulty and his breathing was laboured; but he seemed to be quite composed and in full possession of his faculties.

"I'm thankful to have found you, and I shall be still more thankful if I can be of any comfort to you," answered Mr. Lowndes, mournfully enough; "but I can't be thankful to see you as you are. Why should you have wished it? What made you fight this duel?"

"Well," replied Archie, "I believe I shall do no harm if I tell you. There are certain things to which I have sworn secrecy; but your hearing the main facts will injure nobody, and it won't take many minutes to relate them. Find a chair for yourself and sit down. If I faint or anything, you had better ring for the nurse. She'll know what to do. I may as well begin by saying that that duel was really an execution, and that I only got what I suppose were my deserts by being executed. Before I left England I joined a secret society, which I mustn't particularize, and my belief was that I was to be employed in some sort of soldiering work—in raising an insurrection, in fact. However, that wasn't the view of my employers, and when I got orders from them to assassinate somebody, I could only refuse."

"I should think so, indeed!" ejaculated the astonished

Rector. "A nice set of scoundrels they must be! What on earth could have tempted you to join them, Archie?"

"You shall hear presently. Of course, after disobeying their commands and breaking my oath of allegiance, I was bound to let them punish me in any way that they might think fit——"

"I don't see that at all," interrupted Mr. Lowndes.

"Well, I thought so, and I think so still. Added to which, my one wish was to get rid of life. Death, as you can easily understand, is the only punishment that they ever inflict, and they sent a man here to kill me. As he was a good fellow and had been a friend to me, he naturally didn't like the job; so to make it less unpleasant for him, I made a pretence of quarrelling with him and accepted a challenge from him in due form; and—and then he didn't quite shoot me through the heart. I daresay," added Archie, meditatively, "that his hand was a little shaky; for I have seen him practising with a pistol in a shooting gallery, and a better shot I never met in my life."

"Ah, dear me!" groaned Mr. Lowndes; "I wish he had been a worse one—or that he had had a conscience!"

"Oh, he has a conscience right enough. He did his duty according to his lights, and he certainly thought that I had failed in mine. Personally, I shouldn't like shooting a deserter; but I might have had to do it, you know, in old days. I'm glad to say that I can die without any ill feeling against these fellows; though I doubt whether they are much use. Anyhow, they have answered my purpose; so I have nothing to complain about."

"You mean, I suppose, that they have done for you what you would have hesitated to do with your own hand. But, my poor dear fellow, why did you want to throw your young life away? I'm very much afraid that you have been cruelly deceived by somebody."

"No, the deception has been on my side. Now, Mr. Lowndes, I am going to confess the whole truth to you if I can; but you musn't interrupt me, please, or I shall never get through. I daresay you remember that I left the Priory for Aldershot on the night when Morton met with his death. Well, it was I who killed him."

Mr. Lowndes could not suppress an ejaculation, notwithstanding the request which had just been made to him.

"Yes," Archie went on, "I killed him, though I was

as innocent as you are of any intention to commit murder. It was very bad luck. I missed my train, and while I was wandering about, waiting for the next one, I met Morton, who had just heard of my engagement to his sister, and who was drunk and abusive. He began by trying to get up a row with me; but of course I wouldn't have that, and as I took him by the arm to get him safely past the cliff—because he was reeling all about the place—he first pretended to be very affectionate and then did his best to shove me over the edge. The end of it was that he did shove me over, and if I hadn't been brought up short by a narrow shelf of rock I should certainly have been dashed to pieces. I wish to God I had been! However, I didn't know what was to come; so I made a desperate struggle for life, and he stamped on my hands to make me loosen my hold, and then I caught him by the legs and he fell and rolled over the brink. That's the whole truth. I'm sure you won't think I would tell you a lie on my death-bed."

"I should not have suspected you of telling a lie at any time," answered Mr. Lowndes, as Archie paused and sank back gasping for breath. "Why did you not say this before?"

"Because I didn't think I should be believed. It doesn't sound like the truth, you know. I was sure that nobody could have seen what had happened; so I went on to Aldershot, and when I was sent for I tried to look as much horrified as every one else was at the accident. It wasn't straight or honest, I quite admit that; but—well, the long and the short of it is that I couldn't bear to lose Cicely. And it stands to reason that I should have lost her if I had confessed to her that I had killed her brother."

The Rector shook his head.

"Cicely would have believed you and stood by you," he said.

"No; she didn't love me enough for that. I think one would have to love a man very much before one could accept such a story and marry him in the face of the outcry that would be raised against him. I don't deny that I was wrong; but I'm not sure that I wasn't wise. Anyhow, I was punished; for it turned out, after all, that the whole scene had been witnessed by old Coppard, who was in the woods—poaching, I suppose. He kept it dark for a long time; but at last he blurted it all out to Chetwode, and that was final. The only thing left for me to do was to get out of the

place and break off my engagement, and—and find somebody accommodating enough to put an end to me."

If poor Archie had been sound and well, Mr. Lowndes might have felt it his duty to scold him a little; but as matters stood, he could not bring himself to do that, and only said sorrowfully:

"It *was* Chetwode who persuaded you to go, then?"

"Not exactly. I had made up my mind to go, and all he did was to give me introductions to people who seemed likely to put me in the way of being decently killed."

"I daresay he was willing enough to do that."

"Perhaps; I can't tell for certain. He has kept my secret, and I think he may have been disinterested; though Bobby Dare, from whom I had a letter not long ago, doesn't, and I presume, from your face, that you don't either. If it hadn't been for Bobby's letter I shouldn't have made a clean breast of it to you—it wouldn't have been worth while. But now I think that Cicely ought to know the truth, and I want you to repeat all I have said to her. Then she can judge for herself. And will you tell her, please, that I never loved, and never could have loved, any one but her. I

mention that because Bobby wrote some nonsense about Madame Souravieff, which she may have believed."

Archie's voice had been growing weaker and his articulation less distinct. He now closed his eyes, and Mr. Lowndes, after twice speaking to him and receiving no reply, thought it better to ring the bell. The doctor and the nurse at once appeared; and the former, when he had administered a restorative to his patient, said:

"I will ask you to leave him now, sir." He added in a lower tone: "Later in the day, if there should be any change—you would perhaps wish to be at hand—yes? I am obliged to go away, but the nurse will call you if necessary. I think, however, that he has probably a day or two left to live."

All this time Mrs. Lowndes had been waiting impatiently for her husband to escort her to the Imperial Picture Gallery and the Schatzkammer; so that when he appeared she had some incisive remarks to make upon the selfishness of unpunctuality. As soon as she had heard his excuse, however, she became as sympathizing as could be desired and wanted to make some beef-tea immediately, because she was sure that no foreigner understood these things. But the Rector said:

"I'm afraid it isn't worth while, Maria. The doctor told me there was no hope, and indeed I could see that for myself. It has been a most deplorable affair. If only the poor lad had had sense enough to speak the truth at the outset!"

"But even if he had, Robert, I don't see how Cicely could have married him. It seems that he really did cause the wretched man's death, though he did it unintentionally."

"Under all the circumstances, I shouldn't have regarded that as an insurmountable obstacle, and I don't believe that Cicely would either—if she really loved him."

"Only, as I have so often told you, she didn't. I am ready to acknowledge that I have maligned him, and to heap ashes upon my head; but I know I am right about her."

"It does not much signify now," observed Mr. Lowndes. And then, after a pause: "I think we shall have to go straight home as soon—as soon as it is all over."

Mrs. Lowndes's face fell a little; but she was a worthy woman, in spite of some small weaknesses, and she answered submissively:

"Well—if you think so, Robert."

"I might write," said her husband; "but upon the whole I would rather convey this news by word of mouth than by letter. What I dread is that Cicely may engage herself to that man Chetwode, and if once she were to do that, she would be very apt to shut her ears and stick to her word."

"But has he done anything disgraceful? I suppose he would say that, when he heard the truth, he did the most friendly thing that could be done. He didn't give information, and he helped the unfortunate man to escape."

"Yes, yes; but I don't like that assassination business. If he didn't actually instigate it, he must have known what was likely to happen and what the inevitable consequence would be. Unless I am very much mistaken in her, Cicely won't marry him after hearing this story. Anyhow, I should never forgive myself if I left any stone unturned to save her from him."

This good couple had not the heart to go sight-seeing that day, the remainder of which they spent in their bedroom, drearily enough, awaiting a summons which did not come. But late in the evening somebody tapped at the door, and the doctor put in his head.

"There is no immediate danger," he said; "but if you have anything more to say to your friend, it would be well that you should go to him now. The Sister tells me that his mind has been a good deal wandering. To-morrow, perhaps, he would not know you."

The Rector, of course, hurried to Archie's bedside, and found him quite composed and rational; but in truth there was little more to be said. The dying man had a few messages to send to his friends, and for the rest he was ready and willing to accept the last consolations of religion. Happily for him, his faith was of that unquestioning order with which the majority of our countrymen are blessed. Like a true Briton, he had always hated the labour and misery of connected thought, and he was humble enough to believe that the creed which had commended itself to his forefathers was good enough for him. He had led much the same sort of life as other young men lead—not much better and certainly not any worse. He was sorry for the sins that he had committed, and glad that he had never been guilty of conduct unbecoming an officer and a gentleman; and he was not afraid to die.

"I funked it a little bit some time ago," he confessed simply; "but now I don't seem to mind. It's all right."

A plain man like Mr. Lowndes could only hope and believe so. If Archie Bligh was not "all right," then assuredly nine-tenths of us must be all wrong; and although that is perhaps the orthodox doctrine, it is a very hard one for good-natured folks to swallow.

The night passed without much perceptible alteration in the patient's state; but towards morning he became delirious, and, as the doctor had anticipated, he never recovered consciousness. Within twenty-four hours of the time when he had made his confession to Mr. Lowndes, he died, leaving behind him at least one person to whom his death appeared in the light of a calamity.

But Mrs. Lowndes, after shedding some natural tears, said that perhaps it was all for the best.

"You see if he had recovered there would inevitably have been complications. It isn't as if Cicely really loved him; and supposing that she had married him without loving him, they would both have been miserable. It seems almost a pity that she should have to be told this tragic story."

"She is certainly going to be told," answered the Rector with decision. "We will start for England as soon as we have buried our poor lad; and meanwhile I

have telegraphed to her, merely saying that her cousin has been killed in a duel here, and that I am coming home to give full particulars. They hurry things over so these countries! The doctor tells me we shall be able to leave in a couple of days."

This forecast of the doctor's proved, however, to have been somewhat over-sanguine. Within the specified time all that was mortal of Archie Bligh had indeed been laid in the cemetery; but the police gave a good deal of trouble, and many formalities had to be gone through before Mr. Lowndes was permitted to take possession of the papers and effects of the deceased. Not until after the lapse of ten days was the harassed and impatient Rector able to take his place in the Cologne express, and as during that time he had had no news of Cicely beyond a brief acknowledgment of his telegram, he was by no means as easy in his mind about her as he could have wished to be. For after all, the mere fact of Archie's death would hardly be enough to prevent her from accepting the hand of Mark Chetwode.

"She can throw the man over, though," Mr. Lowndes consoled himself by reflecting; "and it shall be no fault of mine if she doesn't."

CHAPTER XIV.

MADAME SOURAVIEFF HEARS SOME GOOD NEWS

ANYBODY who has ever committed an act of self-sacrifice —and most of us, it may be conjectured, have been guilty of that folly once or twice—must be aware that only after the deed has been done does the shoe really begin to pinch. We are willing to give up a very great deal for those whom we love, or what would our love be worth? And we don't want thanks or expect that the laceration of our feelings should be quite understood, and if we could only die and have done with it, perhaps we should die more or less happy. But we are not, as a general thing, required to die ; we are merely required to part with a right arm, or a right leg, or some trifle of that sort, and when once the mutilation has been accomplished and the dreadful, inevitable reaction has set in, we are left to ask ourselves mournfully how we are to get through the rest of our existence in that maimed condition. It is not the loss

but the process of growing accustomed to the loss that is so weary and so intolerable.

Thus it was that Madame Souravieff, after she had lightly pitched her wandering tent in Paris, was a restless and miserable woman. So long as she had felt sure of Mark's love, or at all events had only half doubted it, she had been able to amuse herself very well when absent from him, and had found the world full of other interesting things and persons; but now that she had lost him, now that he was going to marry a woman younger and prettier than herself, the world assumed an altogether changed aspect, and it seemed to her that not one of its inhabitants except Mark was interesting at all. It was not that she had any lack of friends in Paris; for at the first approach of autumn all true Parisians are only too delighted of an excuse to hurry back to their beloved city, and there were enough ministers, ex-ministers, and future ministers on the banks of the Seine at that time to provide ample employment and diversion for a patriotic lady amongst whose schemes that of a Russo-French alliance had ever held a most prominent place. There were journalists, too, and literary men, besides plenty of her own compatriots, who had a respectful admiration for

her. But the unfortunate thing was that they all bored her to death. Their conversation, which she had once thought so witty, struck her as laboured, stale, and artificial; she could not discover a conviction or an enthusiasm or an original idea among them; she wished them at the uttermost ends of the earth, *tutti quanti*, and yawned in their faces without so much as taking the trouble to put her hand before her mouth. This made them think all the more highly of her, but their forbearance did not inspire her with any sentiments of gratitude.

"I have been a perfect imbecile!" she kept saying to herself. "It is true that if it were to be done again, I should be a perfect imbecile again; still I have given up everything, and I shall receive nothing in return."

Nevertheless, one fine morning she did receive something which was totally unexpected, and which the religious feeling, which was quite strong and genuine in her, caused her to accept with tears of joy as a reward sent her by Heaven in return for her unselfishness. This was no less glorious a piece of news than that of her husband's death, conveyed to her in a letter, dated Bad-Gastein, from the obsequious Victor.

"I have the profound regret," Victor wrote, "to announce to Madame la Comtesse that Monsieur le Comte expired two days ago, after an illness which for a fortnight past has left us no grounds for hope. I trust that Madame la Comtesse will acquit me of all blame in not having apprised her earlier of the melancholy circumstance. I was forbidden to do so; and being only a servant, I was compelled to limit myself to a respectful remonstrance. M. le Comte Paul, who was telegraphed for ten days ago, is here, and by his orders I am writing to say that Madame's presence at Gastein is considered desirable for the discussion of family affairs. But should the journey appear too long for Madame, M. le Comte Paul will have the honour to meet her at any place between this and Russia which it may please her to appoint."

Madame Souravieff telegraphed to say that she would leave for Gastein by the first train, and made preparations for her journey without an instant's delay. Her mind was in a tumult of excitement, and she could not collect her ideas. All other considerations were overshadowed by the one great and blessed fact that she was free. Doubtless she might also be pretty nearly destitute; for her legal claim upon her late husband's

fortune was only a modest one; but she could not bring herself to contemplate so mournful a contingency as that he should have left everything away from her. Only she knew that his brother Count Paul, with whom she had not been upon speaking terms for years, would surrender nothing to her that he was not obliged to surrender, and it certainly behoved her to accept the invitation sent her by that hostile personage.

Gastein is a somewhat inaccessible spot, and when at length she reached her destination she was ready to drop with fatigue. Nevertheless—for in the course of her protracted journey she had had time to develop a good deal of uneasiness as to her financial position—she sent a message to her brother-in-law immediately on her arrival, to the effect that she would be glad to see him before retiring to rest. In obedience to this intimation, Count Paul Souravieff, a tall, straight-backed old gentleman, presently entered her sitting-room and bowed low. He said, with an ironical smile, that he could understand her anxiety, which perhaps was scarcely to be considered groundless; but that it was his pleasing duty to relieve it.

"I have thought it advisable, Madame," he added, "that before transporting the remains of my lamented

brother to Russia, I should seek a personal interview with you, in order to explain clearly to you the conditions of his will, and to warn you that non-compliance with these will entail forfeiture of the revenues to which you will otherwise be entitled."

It now appeared that Madame Souravieff would be a very rich woman indeed, as long as she devoted no portion of her wealth to swelling the funds of secret political societies, and withdrew from all connection with any such society to which she might already have become affiliated.

"I am told," observed Count Paul, "that these stipulations may be difficult or even impossible for you to accept."

"No," answered Madame Souravieff, quickly.

"Indeed? I am glad to hear it, for your sake. It may perhaps occur to you that we have no means of ascertaining whether you keep to your engagement or not; but I feel bound to caution you that this is a mistake. The slightest breach of faith on your part will be promptly reported to us and as promptly acted upon."

"Oh, I am quite aware of that," Madame Souravieff replied with a laugh.

"Permit me once more to say that I am very glad, for your sake, to hear it. I believe I have now told you as much about the provisions of my late brother's will as you would be interested in hearing."

"There are no further restrictions, then?" Madame Souravieff asked, after a pause "Nothing is said as to —re-marriage, for example?"

Count Paul, who had hitherto been irreproachably courteous, although he was not best pleased at parting with two-thirds of an inheritance which might have been his, forgot himself so far as to laugh outright at this.

"Reassure yourself, Madame," he answered; "not a word is said upon that most important point. I congratulate you upon the common sense, as well as the good taste, displayed by the question, and I have the honour to wish you good-evening."

Two days after this, Madame Souravieff left Gastein on her return journey to Paris, without having again seen her brother-in-law. Messages had been exchanged through Victor, and her offer to accompany her husband's remains to Russia had been declined on behalf of his family, although her right to do as she pleased in the matter had not been disputed. She had

replied that it did not please her to insist upon a privilege so grudgingly conceded, and in truth she was thankful to be set at liberty. For her intention now was to make straight for England, and she was in a terrible fright lest she should reach that country too late to avert an irremediable calamity.

Two things comforted her and soothed her impatience on the way: she knew Mark's deliberate and cautious method of going to work, and she remembered how he had told her that she would always hold the first place in his heart. He had certainly said that he would marry her if she were free, and now she was not only free but rich. Of losing her riches she had no fear. She was not deeply implicated with the societies to which exception had been taken, and the duties which she had assumed could easily be got rid of. It would be understood that she could be of far more service to the cause in a wealthy and independent capacity than by attending occasional councils and bringing no money to the chest.

She had proceeded as far as Munich, and was crossing the platform towards the refreshment-room in order to get some breakfast, when she almost ran into the arms of a burly gentleman in the attire of

an English clergyman, who ejaculated "God bless my soul!"

"One would think we were playing hide-and-seek all over Europe," laughed Madame Souravieff. "One day I see you in Paris, another day in Bavaria! Is it permitted to inquire whither you are bound?"

"I am bound for home," Mr. Lowndes replied, with a grave face. "I am sorry to say that I have sad news for our friends there. I am sure that you, too, will be sorry to hear of poor young Archie Bligh's death in Vienna, from a wound received in a duel. By a mere accident, I happened to put up at the hotel where he was lying, and so was able to be with him at the last. Under the circumstances, I preferred going back to Abbotsport to finishing my holiday abroad."

Madame Souravieff was really rather sorry. Archie had wearied her a good deal; but, as will be remembered, she had objected to his being put to death, and had hoped, without much expecting it, that his life might be spared. "Poor young man!" she exclaimed. "Killed in a duel, you say? That seems odd. Are you sure that it was in a duel that he got his wound?"

"Did you think it probable that he would be wounded in any other way?" asked Mr. Lowndes, sharply.

"I know nothing about it. The last time that I saw Mr. Bligh he was in good spirits and had no intention of leaving England, so far as I was aware. I should have thought it improbable that he would find anybody to fight a duel with in Austria."

"Madame Souravieff," said the Rector, suddenly, "I daresay you will excuse my alluding to gossip which you may very likely have heard already. People in Abbotsport are under the impression that you had a good deal to do with Archie's disappearance——"

"The report was not worth contradicting," interrupted Madame Souravieff. "I am not much surprised at such things having been said; but there is no truth in them."

"I never believed that there was; and now I know that they were false. But what I believed all along, and now know to be a fact, is that your friend Chetwode was at the bottom of it. Is it taking a great liberty to ask whether you also are aware of that?"

Madame Souravieff shrugged her shoulders.

"It may be as you say," she answered. "If you know for a fact that it is so you know rather more than I do. Perhaps Mr. Bligh has confided something to you before he died?"

The Rector considered for a moment. He knew that

the task which lay before him might not prove a simple one, and that Cicely would not necessarily take the same view of Mark's conduct as he did. No chance of securing an ally ought, therefore, to be neglected, and for several reasons he thought it quite possible that Madame Souravieff's co-operation might be obtained. If, as he rather suspected, she did not desire this marriage, she would probably be able to give useful information with regard to Mr. Chetwode's antecedents ; if, on the other hand, she was in favour of it, no harm would be done by ascertaining her sentiments. The only question was whether he was entitled to reveal to her the circumstances under which Morton Bligh had met with his death. But as to this the Rector had already made up his mind that there must be no further concealment. Neither for Cicely's sake nor for the sake of Archie's memory was it desirable that Mark Chetwode and old Coppard should be left in a position to threaten disclosures. The truth must be told, and people must form their own conclusions about it.

Accordingly he said :

"If you can spare me ten minutes, I will be quite frank with you. My wife is in the refreshment-room, getting her breakfast, and I am supposed to be washing

and shaving myself; so that we shall not be interrupted. To begin with, let me say in so many words that I am sure Chetwode means to marry Cicely Bligh, if he can, and that I suspect him of having designedly brought about his rival's death."

"You are certainly frank," observed Madame Souravieff, with a faint smile. "Pray go on."

Mr. Lowndes told his tale clearly and succinctly, as beseemed a man who had no time to lose.

"And now, Madame Souravieff," he concluded, "I daresay you will understand why I have taken you into my confidence. I want to open Cicely's eyes, and I cannot feel sure that they will be opened by the facts that I have mentioned, although to my mind those facts speak for themselves plainly enough. You see, we know very little about Chetwode, whereas you, I believe, have been intimately acquainted with him for years. If, therefore, you were disposed to give me any help——"

"Oh, I am on your side," interrupted Madame Souravieff, laughing somewhat tremulously. "I could help you, perhaps—there are circumstances—but I must have time to think: all this has come upon me so suddenly! You are going straight to Abbotsport?"

"Yes, we shall stop nowhere. I have already been delayed much longer than I had wished."

"It is not unlikely that I also may go to Abbotsport, for I wish to see Mr. Chetwode. Only it is absolutely necessary that I should spend a few days in Paris to buy mourning. I forgot to tell you that my husband is dead."

Mr. Lowndes began some conventional expressions of condolence, which she cut short unceremoniously.

"I am not afflicted," said she. "As you are aware, my husband and I did not live together, and you would not believe me if I were to feign regrets which I cannot feel. Still I must wear black for a time. Perhaps you had better tell Mr. Chetwode what has happened, and you may add—for I am sure he will be glad to hear it—that my husband has left me a great deal of money." After remaining silent for a moment, she asked, with the same uncertain sort of laugh: "Now do you understand in what way I can be of assistance to you?"

"Not quite," answered the Rector, wonderingly.

"Ah!—well, never mind. At any rate I am with you; and this I can promise: that marriage shall never take place. There are more ways than one of putting a stop to it; only the best and simplest way would be

that she should refuse him. I think you might persuade her to do that without my aid."

"But suppose she has already accepted him?"

"In that case we should be obliged to have recourse to other measures. I do not believe that Mr. Chetwode is in love with her, I must tell you; and I do not believe that he was responsible, except indirectly, for that young man's death. But it is a matter of opinion, and you have a right to yours. Here comes your wife; I think, if you will excuse me, I would rather not stay and speak to her. We shall meet again soon."

And Madame Souravieff walked quickly away, leaving the Rector to explain his unshaven chin and unwashed face to his consort.

The revelation which had been made to Madame Souravieff disturbed her less after she had had time to reflect upon it than it had done at first. Mark had not told her the truth; but he might very well plead that he had not been authorized to do so, and as for his having taken advantage of an opportunity to remove Archie from his path, that did not prove him to be in love with the girl whom he proposed to marry. In short, she would not let herself believe that it was possible to founder in sight of land. She had liberty,

she had wealth, she had had Mark's own assurance that he still loved her.

"It is not an English schoolgirl who shall rob me of him now," she said to herself between her set teeth.

And yet she knew, as everybody knows, that in certain respects schoolgirls are a great deal more than a match for middle-aged women.

CHAPTER XV.

MARK IS SPARED A JOURNEY

The telegram, announcing her cousin's death, which Mr. Lowndes had despatched from Vienna, not only shocked and grieved Cicely, but made her feel as if she were in some measure to blame for this catastrophe. In the presence of it she forgot her wrongs, and could have no more hard or contemptuous thoughts about poor Archie. She could only remember that he had loved her once with all his heart, and that if she had not retained his love, it was perhaps because she had been too dictatorial with him and too prompt in resenting the slightest tendency towards usurpation of authority on his part. It had, after all, been no such unreasonable thing that he should have wished to be allowed some voice in the management of her affairs, and had she been a little less unyielding he would probably not have been driven to seek for sympathy in another quarter. But her self-reproach and the

excuses which she was able to make for Archie did not lead her to make any excuse for Madame Souravieff, whom, in the absence of further information, she not unnaturally assumed to be the cause of the fatal encounter. She said as much to Bobby Dare, who had been greatly distressed by the news, which reached him through Miss Skipwith, and who took upon himself to reply that some other explanation would assuredly be forthcoming when Mr. Lowndes returned.

"Most likely he got into a row with some fire-eating Austrian officer," was his own conjecture. "And until I hear the contrary," he added, "I, for one, sha'n't believe that Archie ever saw that woman's face again after he left this."

"Perhaps you are right," answered Cicely, with unusual humility; "I am sure I hope so. Only, if you are, his having gone away at all becomes unaccountable."

"It will be accounted for when we get Mr. Lowndes back, I have no doubt," said Bobby. "Unfortunately that will be too late to make any difference now, though."

"It will make a very great difference to me if I find that I have been unjust to poor Archie," returned

Cicely: "but I don't wish you to think that our engagement could ever have been renewed. If he hadn't broken it off, I should have kept to my word, because I told him honestly when I accepted him that I didn't love him in the way that he loved me; but I should never do such a thing again; I am quite sure now that it is a great mistake."

Bobby looked inquiringly at her, without replying. He could not help being pleased to hear that she had not loved Archie, yet his pleasure was neutralized by an idea which at once suggested itself to him. How had she found out that marriage without love is such a mistake? He had been wrong, it appeared, in supposing that she had cared for her cousin; might he not also have been wrong in supposing that she did not really care for Mark Chetwode? However, he had said all that he intended to say against that inscrutable personage, so that he could only keep silence and hope for the Rector's return.

The Rector, as we know, had met with inconvenient delays at Vienna, and had refrained from writing because he had expected each day to be the last that he would have to spend in that city. Consequently there was plenty of time for Cicely to think over all

possible explanations of the mystery, and for Mark Chetwode to communicate his personal impressions to her. He could not deny, when pressed to say just what he believed, that these were identical with her own; although he displayed a good deal of reluctance in making the admission.

"Of course, I know nothing," was his answer; "and to tell you the truth I would rather not know. But I suppose most people, on hearing that an Englishman had fought a duel in a foreign city, where he was a complete stranger, would be inclined, as I am, to say: '*Cherchez la femme.*'"

"Madame Souravieff is not unlikely to have been in Vienna, is she?"

"Well, she is often there. But I have not heard a word from her since she left this country."

"And her husband—is it not very possible that she may have met him there?"

Mark smiled.

"It is not very probable," he replied. "Count Souravieff does not meet his wife if he can help it. Moreover, he is an old man and an invalid. Finally, I doubt whether he would fight any duels for her sake."

"But if it was not Count Souravieff, who could it have been?"

"Really, I cannot tell you," answered Mark, after a pause. "But," he continued, hesitatingly, "I can easily imagine that there may have been somebody else. You see, Madame Souravieff has a great many friends in various parts of the world, and—and one can understand that a quarrel may have arisen——"

Cicely stopped him with a slight gesture of disgust.

"Oh, well," she said, "we had better not discuss it any more until Mr. Lowndes comes. Then perhaps we shall hear the whole truth."

"Yes; that is much the best way," agreed her companion. "At present we can only guess—we know nothing."

Now, as a matter of fact, Mark knew a good deal, though not quite as much as he would have liked to know. News had reached him that his *protégé* had proved unfaithful, that he had been condemned to death as a traitor, and that the sentence had been duly carried out; but as to all details he was left in ignorance. His own belief and his very fervent hope was that the story of the duel was apocryphal, that Mr. Lowndes had either been misinformed or had invented it by way of break-

ing things gently, and that Archie had not been seen alive by his old friend. Still there was a possibility of the young man's having made a dying confession, so that it behoved survivors to be careful of what they said. If the worst came to the worst, he would be able, he hoped, to justify all that he had done; yet that the news of Archie's death should have reached his friends so promptly was from all points of view an untoward circumstance. One consequence of it which Mark speedily perceived was that it had, for the time being, completely checked the progress of his suit. Cicely might say that she would not discuss the subject; but it was evident that she could think about nothing else, and all his efforts to divert her thoughts into other channels met with only a passing success. He was thoroughly unhappy; because his love for the girl only increased as it became more and more plain to him that he had not yet won her heart.

One evening he had dropped in for a cup of tea at the Priory, and foolish old Miss Skipwith, as her habit was, had gone out of the room to look for something and had not returned. Cicely, who was now growing seriously alarmed at the Rector's prolonged silence, confessed her uneasiness.

"Yesterday I couldn't stand it any longer, and I telegraphed to him," she said; "but no answer has come. What can have happened to him?"

"Would you like me to go and see?" asked Mark, smiling.

"To Vienna, do you mean? Oh, I could not ask you to do that!"

"Why not? I could be there on the fourth day, and I would at once send you a telegram. It is a very little thing to do. Besides," he added in a lower tone, "there is nothing in the world, great or small, that I would not do for you, if you asked me."

Cicely looked at him and remained silent for a moment.

"You are very kind," she murmured at length.

"Well, then," said Mark, rising, "that is settled. I will go home and pack a few things now. I shall catch the first mail from London to-morrow morning, and within about forty hours from that time I hope I shall be able to relieve your mind. Good-bye, Miss Bligh."

She gave him a grateful look as she held out her hand to him. He bent over it, just touched her fingers with his lips and was gone.

It was really very prettily done, and Cicely was as

much touched by what he had refrained from saying as by what he had said. For of course she could not but understand how matters were with him, and she thought he had behaved very like a gentleman in observing such reticence.

Mark, for his part, had the satisfaction of feeling that he had scored a point. He was doing no good where he was, and he did not at all object to the journey to Vienna. On the contrary, he was rather anxious to have the first word with Mr. Lowndes. It soon appeared, however, that that privilege could be secured without leaving the United Kingdom; for he had only just passed out of the garden into the park, when he found himself face to face with the missing Rector, to whom he said, laughingly:

"Well, this is fortunate! If I hadn't met you I should have started in a few hours to look for you. Miss Bligh was getting so anxious and uncomfortable at receiving no news that I promised just now to go to Vienna and find out whether you were dead or alive."

No responsive smile showed itself upon Mr. Lowndes's face.

"I ought, perhaps, to have written," he answered; "but I had hoped to be here before this, and there are

things which it is more easy to say than to write. I may as well tell you at once that before poor young Bligh died, he confessed everything to me."

"Yes?" said Mark, without moving a muscle.

"You understand, I suppose, what I mean by everything. I know that Morton Bligh lost his life in a scuffle which he provoked, and that that unfortunate lad concealed the truth, fearing lest he should be accused of murder. I know that Coppard saw what had happened and reported it to you. I also know that you persuaded Archie to leave England, break off his engagement and join a gang of conspirators, who have had him assassinated because he declined to be himself an assassin."

"I thought you stated in your telegram that he had been killed in a duel," said Mark.

"So he was—if standing up to be shot and firing into the air can be called taking part in a duel. The fellow whom they told off to murder him didn't quite like the idea of stabbing him in the back, it seems; so to soothe his susceptibilities, Archie consented to go through the form of quarrelling with him. It was a distinction without a difference, for of course he was killed, though not—as was supposed—killed on the spot."

"I am sorry for it," said Mark. "I am sorry, too, that he told you his reasons for leaving England, because I am afraid you mean to distress Miss Bligh by repeating the story to her."

"Most undoubtedly I do."

"Well, it is for you to judge of the wisdom of such a proceeding. Am I mistaken in gathering from your tone that you think me to blame in this matter?"

"I don't care to disguise what I think," answered the Rector, bluntly. "I think that Archie's death lies at your door; I think you deceived him as to the character of the men to whom you induced him to swear obedience; I think you knew that by swearing obedience he was virtually throwing away his life; and I believe you did all this because, for purposes of your own, you wished to get rid of him."

"These are serious accusations, Mr. Lowndes," observed Mark. "I won't dwell upon the fact that they are both false and insulting, because clergymen, I believe, are licensed to say what they please without being called to account; but I think you will see that you ought either to substantiate or withdraw them. You charge me with having contrived Mr. Bligh's death for purposes of my own. To what purposes do you allude?"

The Rector did not much like answering the question, but could not see his way to shirk it.

"I think," said he, "that you wanted him to break off the engagement to his cousin in order that you might marry her yourself."

"I presumed that that was what you meant. But do not you see that, if that had been the case, I could very easily have got rid of him without sending him to Bulgaria? When Coppard told me what he had seen, it was evident that I could not allow Miss Bligh to marry her cousin until he had cleared himself of suspicion. Unhappily, he could not clear himself, and I suppose I should have been justified in repeating to her the information that I had received. I did not do so because, in the first place, I wished to avoid giving her pain, and, in the second, I wished to give the unlucky man a chance of escaping. As to the confraternity to which I was the means of introducing him, I expressly warned him that assassination was not excluded from their list of weapons, although I thought it very unlikely that he would ever be employed as an assassin. I can only assure you that it is a matter of great surprise and regret to me that he should have been so employed."

"I can't acquit you, Mr. Chetwode," said the Rector, stubbornly. "Many people would believe the account that you give of your conduct, but I don't; and if that is an insult—well, of course it *is* an insult—I can't help it. I must incur the reproach of sheltering myself behind my cassock, that's all."

"My good sir," answered Mark, blandly, "your insults do not make me feel sore. I am sorry that you do not realize how ridiculous they are; but you are quite at liberty to repeat them to the entire neighbourhood. Impartial persons, I imagine, will know how to judge between us."

"I don't care two straws about the neighbourhood," returned the Rector; "it is of Cicely Bligh that I am thinking."

"I hope Miss Bligh will understand that in acting as I did I had no motive except to spare both her and her cousin."

"She may take that view, but I don't think she will. She is too straightforward. Your duty was plain enough: you ought to have persuaded an unfortunate, panic-stricken fellow to stand up like a man and face the drunken rascal who was his only accuser. Instead of that, you advised him to behave as though he had

been guilty of murder, knowing all the time that he was as innocent as you or I."

"Pardon me, I did not know that. I may have believed in his innocence, but it was impossible for me to know. I had his word for it that he was innocent, and another man's word for the contrary. You forget that he had already behaved as though he were guilty, and that confessions made under threat of exposure do not command much confidence. I doubt whether he could have cleared himself before the bar of public opinion, although I daresay no jury would have convicted him upon Coppard's evidence."

"Oh, you have made yourself very safe," answered Mr. Lowndes. "As I said before, I have no doubt that most people will exonerate you. But you will not be exonerated by me, nor, I think, will you be exonerated by Cicely. Meanwhile, I had better go in and see her. When I have had my say, you can have yours. I ought, by the way, to have mentioned to you that I came across your friend, Madame Souravieff, at a railway station on my way through Germany. She desired me to tell you that her husband is just dead and that he has left her a great deal of money. She said you would be glad to hear that."

If Mark was glad, he certainly did not look so. For the first time in the course of this colloquy, his face fell and his pale cheeks turned a shade paler. More unwelcome news could hardly have reached him, for he well knew that Madame Souravieff's liberty meant the probable termination of his own.

"If only I had had the courage to risk proposing this afternoon," he thought, ruefully, "I might now be able to point to an accomplished fact." He said aloud: "I am sorry to hear of Count Souravieff's death, but glad that he has provided handsomely for his widow. Did she tell you where she was going?"

"Yes; she was going to Paris. After that she intended to come to Abbotsport, for the purpose, as I understood, of seeing you."

Between Munich and London the Rector had had leisure to weigh certain words which had fallen from the Russian lady, as well as to listen to his wife's comments upon the same. Consequently, he was able to appreciate and enjoy the discomfiture of Mr. Chetwode, who rejoined, with raised eyebrows:

"But if she comes to Abbotsport, where does she propose to stay? It would not be possible for me to receive her, I am afraid."

"She did not enter upon that question; I was only with her for ten minutes or so, and nearly all the time we were talking about other matters. About Archie Bligh's death, in fact. Well, Mr. Chetwode, I will wish you good-evening now. It hasn't been pleasant for me to speak to you as I have done; but I couldn't speak in any other way."

Mark raised his hat, turned on his heel, and walked away. His reflections as he tramped homewards were of the most gloomy description; for he knew Madame Souravieff well enough to know that she would not now tamely acquiesce in his marriage, and nothing was more certain than that she could prevent it if she chose. His only hope was in precipitating matters, so that he might be already engaged to Cicely when she arrived; and that hope was but a poor one. Such as it was, however, it must be made the best of, for no other remained. If (but it may be trusted that nothing so horrible can be true) the spirits of the departed are permitted to know what takes place in this world, the spirit of the late Count Souravieff must have been chuckling sardonically at that moment.

CHAPTER XVI.

CICELY DECIDES

Mr. Lowndes was not disappointed with the manner in which Cicely received the news which it was his duty to impart to her. He had hoped—but, bearing in mind the perversity of women, he had not been quite sure—that she would accept Archie's dying statement as true; and it was a great relief to him to find that she did so unhesitatingly.

"I think Coppard has behaved very cruelly about it," she said. "If only he had told the truth at first, all this misery would have been avoided."

"Yes," sighed the Rector; "but what is still more unfortunate is that poor Archie himself did not tell the truth. Coppard, you must remember, probably believed him to be guilty. Well, it's useless to grieve over what is done and can't be undone. My own feeling is that the worst culprit of all is that man Chetwode. I'm glad

I met him just now, and had an opportunity of telling him what I thought of him."

"Yes," agreed Cicely, musingly; "I am glad you met him."

But she did not seem disposed to say much either for or against this neighbour of hers, and the Rector before taking his leave could not refrain from uttering a few words of warning.

"You won't let that fellow talk you over, will you, Cicely? He has a plausible tongue, and his case, as he puts it, doesn't seem so bad."

"You needn't be alarmed," answered Cicely. "I took his part when you were all against him, and I still think I was right in taking his part, since I could not possibly guess the truth; but there never was any danger of—of what you were afraid of."

"Wasn't there? So much the better, then. I myself, as you know, always gave you credit for being true to Archie in your heart. Mrs. Lowndes thinks differently, but Mrs. Lowndes is not always right."

"She is right this time. I am dreadfully sorry—more sorry than I can tell you—for what has happened, and if he had lived I should have married him, perhaps—I don't know. But I never cared for him as he wished

to be cared for, and I ought never to have accepted him. I suppose it isn't in me to care for anybody in that way."

"As you are a human being, my dear," answered Mr. Lowndes, smiling, "I think we may safely assume that you possess that capacity, and that the proper person will turn up in due season."

Cicely shook her head.

"No; I shall end my days as an old maid. Perhaps, after all, that is the wisest thing for an heiress to do. Aunt Susan, who is always protesting that she means to go away, will stay and take care of me, I daresay."

But this modest programme, when unfolded to Miss Skipwith later in the evening, proved to be not at all to that lady's taste. She had made up her mind that Mark Chetwode was the right husband for Cicely, and she was not to be moved from her opinion because it was pointed out to her, firstly, that Mr. Chetwode was not a formal candidate for the honour in question; secondly, that Cicely had never regarded him as more than a friend; and, thirdly, that grave doubts must now be felt even as to his friendliness.

"Ah, that is it!" she exclaimed. "You are angry with him for not having at once told you all he knew.

As if he had any right to betray other people's secrets! It seems to me that he behaved with the utmost kindness and consideration both to you and to that misguided young man. Of course, all that about the secret society and the duel is very sad and very dreadful; but I don't see how you can blame Mr. Chetwode for it."

"I didn't say that I blamed him, did I?" asked Cicely, who in truth had said very little upon the subject.

"No, but you evidently do blame him, and I think that is most unfair. If he had wished to do your cousin an ill turn, what would have been simpler for him than to denounce the murderer? Now, you need not look so angry, my dear; I am not saying for one moment that your cousin *was* a murderer. Only I think you must admit that he behaved like one, and that it was for him, not for Mr. Chetwode, to disprove Coppard's assertions."

It was, in fact, tolerably apparent that Miss Skipwith was not quite convinced of Archie's innocence; and as she was a person to whom conviction could not easily be brought home, Cicely said no more.

When Mark arrived at the Priory on the following morning, the old lady, who had witnessed his approach

from an upper window, ran down into the hall and intercepted him.

"Oh, Mr. Chetwode," she whispered, breathlessly (for the servants were within hearing), "may I say one word to you before you see Cicely? She has been very much distressed by this sad news which Mr. Lowndes has brought us, and I fear she is not best pleased with you about it. But she will come round—I am sure she will come round if you still have patience. I do want you to be patient with her to-day."

"If I have any virtue at all," answered Mark, "I suppose it is patience. At all events, I can promise to lose neither my patience nor my temper with Miss Bligh. Thank you for preparing me, though."

He passed on with a smile upon his lips, but with a sinking pain at his heart; for he was pretty sure that if Cicely had begun by condemning him, his pleas in justification of what he had done would have but little effect upon her. His hope had been that she would be driven to range herself on his side by the hostile bias of Mr. Lowndes. And so, when he was shown into her presence, her frigid greeting did not take him by surprise.

"I am glad that Mr. Lowndes has returned safe and

sound," he began; "but I am afraid that what you have heard from him has made you unhappy."

"It has certainly made me unhappy," answered Cicely; "from first to last it seems to have been a series of wretched mistakes and misfortunes. Archie would have been alive now if he had had an honest friend to advise him."

"You mean, of course, that I was not an honest friend to him. Yet I endeavoured to be so, and if the case were to arise again I should not act differently. Mr. Lowndes and I had something like an altercation about it yesterday, as I daresay you have heard. I didn't convince him; but perhaps I may be able to convince you. Will you at least allow me to try?"

"If you wish," answered Cicely.

"I fully admit that I was more desirous of serving and protecting you than him, and that you were my first thought throughout; nevertheless, I helped him to the best of my ability. Knowing what I knew, I could not possibly stand aside and see you married to him; but I thought there was no occasion for your ever hearing the painful circumstances connected with your brother's death. Bligh himself admitted that there was nothing for him to do but to leave the

place, and he was very anxious to see active service somewhere. It was to gratify his wish that I introduced him to these Bulgarian patriots, who are always upon the point of getting up an insurrection, and perhaps will get one up some day. So far I have nothing to regret. What I do regret extremely is that they should have employed him as they did. You don't, I hope, imagine that I had anything to do with that?"

"Oh, no; I could not believe such a thing!"

"Mr. Lowndes apparently does; but that is of no consequence. The fact is that I knew these men did not stick at assassination, and I said as much to Bligh; but I added what I thought was the truth, that they were most unlikely to select him for work of that kind, and why they did it I cannot in the least understand. From the moment that he disobeyed them, they were sure to inflict the penalty of death upon him; he must have been made aware of that when he took the oath."

Mark paused; but Cicely seemed to have no observation to make. It was only when he was about to speak again that she checked him by saying:

"I suppose you knew all this time how he had died, did you not?"

"I knew nothing at all about it," answered Mark. It has already been mentioned that his standard of veracity was not that of the ordinary Briton.

"You guessed, perhaps. At any rate, you could not have thought that he had been killed in the way that you suggested to me."

"Are you displeased with me because I deceived you?" asked Mark. "But what else could I do? My one wish was to spare you the pain of this discovery, and if I did not tell you the truth—which, as far as that goes, I was not at liberty to do—I could only suggest something to you which was not the truth."

"Was it necessary to suggest calumnies about your friend Madame Souravieff? But I daresay your intentions were good, and I suppose I ought to thank you for having troubled yourself to consider my feelings."

"Do you remember what I told you yesterday?" asked Mark. "I said there was nothing in the world that I would not do for you; and certainly I would do much worse things for your sake than to attribute one additional flirtation to Madame Souravieff. I think I had better say now what you must have guessed long ago—that I love you with all my heart and soul. I

know very well that I am no match for you; I am neither rich enough, nor great enough, nor young enough, nor worthy of you in any way whatsoever. Yet—nobody will ever love you again as I love you. And sometimes I have dared to hope that, as you had allowed me to be your friend, you might at length be induced to let me be more than your friend."

He spoke clearly, but his voice broke once or twice, and she could see that his hands were trembling. There was at least no doubt about his being in earnest, and that perhaps made her answer him more gently than she had at first intended to do. She said:

"I am very sorry that you have had hopes of that kind, Mr. Chetwode, but I don't think I have ever done anything to encourage them. I did look upon you as a friend, and I should still, if——"

"Ah!" interrupted Mark, "don't cast me off because I acted in what seemed to me the only possible manner to act. Try for one moment to imagine yourself situated as I was: what would you have done?"

"I should have told the truth," answered Cicely, promptly; "or at all events I should have persuaded Archie to tell it. But, as I said before, I am willing to believe that you meant well. Only you and I

evidently look at things from different points of view."

"That means that you can't or won't forgive me. Let us say, then, that I was altogether wrong; is it no excuse that I did wrong for love of you?"

"I don't think you quite understand," said Cicely, evading a direct reply, "that all this has nothing to do with my refusing you. I could not marry a man whom I do not love."

"Yet you were ready to marry your cousin without loving him."

"Yes; I accepted him, and I was wrong. I would not do it again, even to please my father, who wished for it so much. You cannot suppose that I shall repeat the mistake in the case of another person, who has no such claim upon me."

For some seconds Mark sat silent and motionless, gazing at the opposite wall. His self-possession, which had been momentarily shaken, seemed to have returned to him, and it was in his customary level voice that he said:

"I did not flatter myself that you cared for me; I was prepared to be rejected. Still, when one has only a single hope in life, one likes to assure oneself that it

is quite dead before burying it. I must not ask you the question; but I believe I may assume that you don't love any man. So long as that is the case, may there not be yet the shadow of a chance for a man who cannot live without you?"

"Not the very smallest," answered Cicely, somewhat more harshly, for she thought his language exaggerated. "I don't know how I can be more explicit than I have been. If you were to ask me a hundred times I could only give you the same answer."

"You are absolutely certain of that?"

"Absolutely certain."

"Then," said Mark, rising slowly, "I know the worst. Which is always a sort of comfort, is it not?"

His face was deadly pale, and the smile which he forced his lips to assume was not participated in by his eyes.

"Good-bye, Miss Bligh," he added, presently. "I shall never see you again."

"Oh, why should you say that," exclaimed Cicely, for she was really shocked by the man's appearance. "We cannot help meeting again if you stay here, and —and if I have spoken unkindly I am sorry for it. I can't pretend to be pleased with the way you have

behaved about Archie; but I shall try not to think of that."

"It does not signify," answered Mark, with the same sickly smile. "Whether you think well or badly of me, or forget me altogether, it will make no difference, for I shall never know. In a few days' time I shall leave Upton Chetwode, and it is very certain that I shall not return. If I believed in astrology, I should say that I had been born under an unlucky star; but I haven't even the good fortune to believe in that or in anything else. Good-bye."

He turned away without shaking hands, and did not so much as turn his head when he reached the door for a last look at the girl whom he loved. Cicely was sorry for him; but he was not the first man whom she had been compelled to reject, and she had reason to believe that the pain caused by rejection does not last for any inordinate length of time. Was not Bobby Dare, for instance, a striking example of the facility with which such wounds may be healed?

CHAPTER XVII.

MARK TAKES LEAVE OF ABBOTSPORT.

After dinner that evening Mark said to his faithful French valet:

"Have you had enough of England, Louis?"

The man made no articulate reply, but shrugged his shoulders, displayed the palms of his hands and drew down the corners of his mouth expressively.

"Well, you will soon be able to turn your back upon this dreary island. I have made up my mind to leave Upton Chetwode, and I daresay I shall have wound up my affairs by to-morrow night. You have served me very well, Louis, and, all things considered, you have grumbled wonderfully little. It is only fair that I should make you a small present now that I am closing the establishment."

Two five-pound notes were then handed to the factotum, whose astonishment was not less profound than his gratitude; for, though Mr. Chetwode had never been

an illiberal master, he could not afford to give away ten pounds every day, and of this his servant was well aware.

The whole of the next morning Mark was engaged in writing, in looking through old letters and papers, and in destroying them when read. In the afternoon he saw his bailiff and his gardener, informed them that he was about to quit England for good, and added that the place would in all probability be let again before long. To each of the three house-servants he gave a month's wages in lieu of warning, together with gratuities which they considered handsome. He had not hitherto taken much notice of any of them, which was perhaps the reason why they now sang his praises loudly and regretted his proposed departure. It is scarcely necessary to add that they could form a shrewd guess as to the cause of this abrupt retreat on his part, and it was their opinion that he bore his disappointment admirably. He looked a little sad, it was true, and there were dark semicircles under his eyes; but they had never known him so affable before, nor could they think that Miss Bligh had been well advised in refusing a gentleman whose temper was under such perfect control.

His self-control was about to be put to a tolerably severe test; for at five o'clock Louis came into his study to announce that Madame Souravieff was in the drawing-room.

"Already!" he ejaculated, involuntarily. But he passed his hand over his forehead as if to smooth away the frown which had gathered there, and went at once to receive his visitor.

He found her standing by the window, looking rather unlike herself in her deep mourning. There was a bright colour in her cheeks, and she seemed to be agitated and excited.

"You expected me?" was the first thing that she said.

"Not quite so soon," answered Mark, with his faint smile. "Mr. Lowndes told me that you were coming here; but he said you were bound for Paris in the first instance."

"I went to Paris; but one cannot get dresses made in a week, and I was devoured with impatience. I bought some ready-made abominations; after all, what did it signify? Now, tell me at once, and tell me quickly—is all well?"

"All is well," replied Mark, tranquilly. "I am as

free as it is possible to be ; for I have done what you wished me to do, and Miss Bligh has refused me in the most unambiguous terms."

Madame Souravieff drew a long breath.

"If you knew how frightened I have been!" she exclaimed. "I had a presentiment that I should find you engaged to that girl and that you would tell me, in your cold way, that honour compelled you to fulfil your engagement. Thank God, I shall not now be driven to do things of which I should have been ashamed after they were done!"

"I think you must really care a little for me, Olga," said Mark.

"Yes—a little," she answered, with an unsteady laugh. "It isn't wrong or dangerous to tell you so any longer. I never told you so before ; I always held you rather at arm's length, didn't I? But now—now!"

Well, now there was only one thing to be done, and Mark did it manfully. What his thoughts and feelings may have been while the woman he had once loved was sobbing on his shoulder, it is needless to inquire too closely. Perhaps a little shame and a little regret were included amongst them. No doubt, too, he was glad that she believed him to be by nature undemonstrative.

When she had calmed down a little and had seated herself in one of the easy-chairs which she had left in Mark's scantily furnished abode on the expiration of her tenancy, a passing feeling of curiosity prompted him to ask :

"What would you have done, Olga, if you had found me formally betrothed to Miss Bligh ?"

"I suppose," answered Madame Souravieff, "I should have gone to her and told her that you were not in love with her, but with me; that I had urged you to marry her because you were poor and she was rich, and that, being now rich and independent myself, I no longer cared to resign you to her. It would have been humiliating for me, and I should have hated myself afterwards for having done it ; but I believe that is what I should have done. Did she give any reason for refusing you ?"

"The best of all reasons; she had no sort of love for me, she said."

"Yet it seemed to me—but no matter ! All that is over and done with ; we are going to be happy now and forget the miserable past. Shall we live in England, Mark ?"

"That is for you to decide. For my own part, I should prefer almost any other country. I have no very

pleasant associations with this place, and I am not sure that we should be precisely popular with our neighbours. There is a prevalent impression among them that you or I, or both of us, are answerable for the disappearance of that unfortunate young Bligh; and the true history of that disappearance, which will probably be made public before long, will scarcely tend to exonerate me in their eyes. By the way, I am at liberty to tell you the true history now."

"You need not; I heard it all from Mr. Lowndes, and I forgive you for having misled me about it. Besides, what do I care, so long as you love me? When I spoke of living in England I didn't mean living here, which would suit neither of us. We are accustomed to the life of cities, and we can't do without it, except for an interval of repose every now and then. In London we should have friends and interests, and if you could obtain a seat in Parliament, which ought not to be difficult——"

"I might use my natural powers of eloquence on behalf of the cause of Panslavism."

"Without joking, an English Member of Parliament who understood something about Russia would be a valuable man to both countries. *Apropos*, I am taking

leave of certain friends of ours. That poor Boris made it a condition of his will that I should withdraw from all secret political societies, and fortunately I am able to comply. Still—England is a safe country."

Mark acquiesced. He seemed ready to acquiesce in anything and everything, and did not even wince when his companion said plainly that she saw no reason for deferring their marriage. He only observed:

"I suppose there will be certain preliminary formalities to be gone through?"

"Oh, yes; but they will not occupy more than a few weeks, I should think, and of course the ceremony will be performed in the quietest possible manner. And then we could go away to some quiet place, and nobody would know anything about it until a decent interval had elapsed. We might even part for a time if you thought it better."

"It is better to be as conventional as one can, perhaps. And that reminds me that your being here is just a shade unconventional. I don't wish to seem inhospitable; but——"

"Did you think I had come to stay with you?" asked Madame Souravieff, laughing. "My dear Mark, I am not quite so devoid of all sense of propriety as

that. I am only paying a friendly call, and presently I shall return to the Seven Stars, where I have engaged rooms."

"The Seven Stars!" exclaimed Mark. "But you cannot possibly stay there; it is nothing but a village public-house!"

"I can't help it if Abbotsport provides such poor accommodation for travellers. I had to find some sort of a roof to shelter me, and I daresay they will be able to give me some eggs and bacon to eat, which is all that I want."

"Yes; but I wasn't thinking of the discomfort. By this time it is probably known all over the place that you are here, and I leave you to imagine what inferences will be drawn from your presence."

"Really, I don't very much care what Abbotsport thinks or says of me. However, you will be relieved to hear that I have taken all due precautions. I announced, immediately after my arrival, that I had come down to see about the furniture which I left here, and I am now supposed to be taking an inventory of it. Taking an inventory is a tedious process, isn't it? One might, perhaps, prolong the operation over three days without exciting astonishment."

"I don't think you could spend three days in a wayside tavern," answered Mark. "Besides, there is no occasion for it. The best plan would be for you to go up to London to-morrow, and on the following day I could join you. I shall have finished all that I have to do here by that time."

"Well, perhaps you are right. The Seven Stars is neither as clean nor as quiet as it might be, and I am not particularly anxious to meet Miss Bligh or Mr. Lowndes, or any of these people. Mark, I want you to tell me something—only I suppose you won't."

"What is it?" inquired Mark.

"Are you sure that you are not a little disappointed at losing that girl?"

"Do I look like a disappointed man?"

"You don't look like anything—you never do. But I can't forget that she is young and pretty, while I am——"

"You are yourself, my dear Olga. Isn't that enough?"

"It is, if you think so."

"Apparently I think so. We shall never be any younger, you and I; we have passed the age of passionate love, or at all events we ought to have passed

it; our ideas of happiness are not what they used to be. You see that when you think of the future, you dream of politics and society and ambition, you don't dream of a cottage in a sequestered valley. Still there is no reason why two people of our time of life should not be happy together in their own way."

"How cold you are!" exclaimed Madame Souravieff.

"I was hot enough in the old days, wasn't I? It was you who used to chill me then."

"I was obliged to be chilling sometimes. But I loved you then and I love you now."

Mark sighed and looked at her for a moment with a certain air of sadness and contrition. Then he abruptly lowered his eyes.

"Yet, if I were to die to-morrow, you would not weep for me very long," he remarked.

For an instant Madame Souravieff seemed inclined to quarrel with him; but she thought better of it and only laughed.

"I should weep for you longer than you deserved," she returned; "longer than you would weep for me, I suspect. However, I hope you will survive until the day after to-morrow, when you will find me and your dinner

waiting at the Hôtel Métropole. As nobody will know or care anything about us there, we may take the liberty of dining together, I suppose."

After Madame Souravieff had left him, Mark gave a great sigh, which it was as well that she could not hear, because it was only too evidently one of relief. He then returned to his papers and spent the remainder of the afternoon and evening in his study, only leaving it for half an hour at dinner-time. The next morning he told Louis there was nothing more to be done except to pack up.

"I am going down to the village to pay a few bills," he added; "if I am not in by two o'clock you will know that I don't want any luncheon. See that Madame Souravieff's furniture is separated from the rest, so that it may be sent up to London when it is wanted."

He gave a few more orders, and then, leaving the house, sauntered for the last time down the hill towards Abbotsport. It was a sunny morning, but the grass was still drenched with the heavy autumn dew, and a haze hung upon the surface of the calm sea. High overhead the pale-blue sky was streaked with mares'-tails for the admonition of the weatherwise, while

every point and headland along the broken coast-line stood out with curious distinctness. But Mark, who did not raise his eyes from the ground as he walked, took no note of sea, sky, or shore, nor did he care whether a change of weather was brewing or not. When he reached the village he quickened his pace and was soon down upon the beach, where he had so often chanced to meet Cicely. He did not meet her now—indeed, he would not have been there if there had been any risk of meeting her at that hour of the day —but presently he encountered a seafaring man, who touched his hat, and whom he scrutinized keenly for a moment, before saying :

" Well, Coppard ! "

" Well, sir." returned Coppard, in somewhat aggrieved accents.

" I imagine, from the look of your face, that you have seen Mr. Lowndes."

" Seen him yesterday afternoon," answered Coppard, sullenly. " Now, I don't bear no grudge agin parsons for preachin' ; 'tis their trade to preach and they must do the best they can at it once a week, same as butchers and bakers and chimney-sweepers must on the other days. But I don't see no need for sermons out o' church,

nor I don't care to be called a liar, whether by parson or layman."

"Has Mr. Lowndes been calling you a liar?" inquired Mark, smiling.

"Well—there! I don't know what he didn't call me. 'Dear me, sir!' I says at last, 'to hear the way you go on, anybody'd think as I'd bin paid to keep back what I know, or else paid for tellin' of it. Whereas,' I says, 'tis no such thing. Little enough did I ever see o' that pore young gentleman's money, and little enough o' Mr. Chetwode's either, if you come to that.'"

"You shall see a sovereign of Mr. Chetwode's money now," said Mark, producing that coin. "I really couldn't offer you payment before; it wouldn't have been prudent. But now, everything is to be made known, it seems; added to which I am upon the point of leaving the place; so I can do as I please. Did Mr. Lowndes give you any instructions as to what you were to reveal?"

"I don't know as I rightly understand you, sir."

"Did he tell you that you were to say you saw Mr. Bligh push his cousin over the cliff?"

"He did not, sir. That's just what he went so far as to call a lie."

"It was rude of him to use such words, but, as to the

fact, he was right; because you didn't see that, you know. What you did see, according to your own account, was that one of the men rolled over the cliff and that the other was within an ace of following him. The truth, I believe, is that Morton Bligh tried to murder his cousin and very nearly succeeded, and that his death was an accident."

"That's what the Rector says, sir," observed Coppard.

"Well, you are not in a position to contradict him, I should say. I think he and Miss Bligh are making a mistake in saying anything about the matter; but they must do what they consider best. Only, as you have always professed to be attached to Miss Bligh, I hope you won't add to the distress which all this is certain to cause her by pretending to know more than you actually do know."

Coppard asseverated, truly enough, that from first to last his wish had been to avoid distressing Miss Cicely, and Mark replied:

"Well, I believe you. Of course, you can understand that the only thing for you to do now is to back up her account of the affair. Now, Coppard, do you think you could find me a boat? I have a fancy for pulling out into the bay this fine morning."

"I'll take 'ee out, sir," answered Coppard. "Want any lines and bait?"

"No, thank you; and I sha'n't want you either. I am going out by myself."

"As *you* please, sir; but don't you get too far from shore. 'Tis comin' on to blow afore long, you may depend, and if you was to have the wind and tide agin you, I don't know but what you might find the job a bit more'n you could manage."

"Oh, I'll take care of myself," answered Mark; and soon afterwards he was seated in the little open boat which Coppard had as usual borrowed from a neighbour.

He pulled, with long, steady strokes, straight out to sea, while Coppard, who had stood watching him for a minute or two, went up to the Seven Stars to get change for the sovereign, and drink a glass or so of beer for the good of the house.

How many glasses of beer Cappord had drunk before the gale which raged for the next twenty-four hours had begun to announce itself with gusts from the north-eastward it is needless to inquire. He was at all events quite sober and a good deal alarmed at three o'clock in the afternoon, when the sea was covered with white-crested waves and no trace of Mr. Chetwode or the

borrowed boat could be discovered. Whatever may have been Coppard's failings, want of pluck was not one of them. He persuaded two of his mates to join him on board a lugger, and bore away down channel in search of the missing man, who, as he very well knew, must either have got ashore somewhere or be in imminent peril by that time. They had a rough experience of it, running before the wind, and a still rougher one when they had to beat back against it, after finding the boat, which was floating bottom upwards, some ten miles away to the south-westward; but of Mark Chetwode nothing was ever seen again. The sea does not give up its dead, and dead men tell no tales. There was nothing in the circumstances to justify a suspicion of suicide; yet more than one person was secretly convinced that when Mark pushed off from shore that morning he had no intention of returning. Be that as it may, one may safely take it for granted that the loss of his life was less bitter to him than the loss of all that he had cared to live for. He was a man who had never been much liked, and had probably been only once loved—which in itself was tantamount to saying that he had been singularly unlucky. For his good qualities were really in excess of his bad ones, and if the latter

had seemed to hold more sway over his conduct than the former, that also, perhaps, had been rather the result of bad luck than of deliberate choice. As he himself had foreseen would be the case, he was very soon forgotten.

CHAPTER XVIII.

CONCLUSION

One afternoon, some weeks after the events chronicled in the last chapter, Cicely Bligh went out for a ride all by herself. It seemed probable that, whether she rode or drove or walked, in future she would be all by herself; and that, no doubt, was one reason why she was in very low spirits. Solitude, which is sad for everybody, is doubly sad for the young. Cicely, looking forward into the future, saw that there would henceforth be no companionship for her save that of Miss Skipwith, and although she was sure of having plenty of duties to fill up her time, she was equally sure that there would be very few pleasures to relieve the monotony of managing a large estate. If you are happy, it is an immense blessing to be also rich; but if you are unhappy, wealth is but a poor compensation to fall back upon, and Cicely thought she had good reasons for being unhappy. One short year had robbed her of so

much! She had lost her father; she had lost her cousin, who had at least been her true lover; finally, she had lost one whom she would fain have believed to be her friend. Nothing remained to her except material comfort, and as she had enjoyed that all her life long, she naturally set little store by it. However, she thought a gallop would do her good, and when she had reached the breezy downs and had given her horse his head she certainly did feel all the better for the fresh air and exercise. Only, as she was returning homewards in the dusk of evening, her heart began to sink once more. She knew what was before her—dinner with Aunt Susan, a little playing of the piano while Aunt Susan nodded in her chair; then bed, but not necessarily sleep. And it would be the same to-morrow night, and the next night, and for an endless vista of coming nights. One must be forty at the very least to contemplate such an outlook without shuddering.

Now, while Cicely was still some little distance from her own door, she descried in front of her the figure of a certain young man whom she recognized, and, touching her horse with her heel, she cantered across the grass until she overtook him, not ill-pleased to lay aside her sombre meditations for a time.

Bobby Dare turned round when she drew rein beside him, and took off his hat.

"I was going to pay my respects to you," said he. "Are you at home?"

"I shall be presently," answered Cicely. "As I have met you, we may as well walk on together."

She beckoned to her groom, and, telling him to trot on to the stables, jumped lightly to the ground, disregarding Bobby's proffered assistance.

"It seems ages since I saw you last," she went on in a very friendly tone—for, indeed, Bobby had spent the preceding fortnight in London. "How is your arm now? You have discarded the sling, I see."

"Oh, yes," he answered, cheerfully. "I've discarded the sling, and I'm pronounced to be fit for service. I hope to be afloat again before long."

"You don't mean to leave the Navy, then?" asked Cicely; and there seemed to be a slight suspicion of disappointment in her voice.

"Not for worlds! Why should I?"

"Well, I thought that, as you are rich now, or at least comparatively rich—and by the way, I have never had an opportunity of telling you how glad I was to

hear that poor Archie had left his money to you. He could not have left it to a truer friend."

"Thank you for saying so; but I'm afraid I don't deserve to have such things said of me. The truth is, that if I befriended him it wasn't so much for his sake as for yours."

"You did your best to befriend us both, and I suppose you were right in almost everything that you said, and I ought to eat a great dish of humble pie. Only I can't even now feel convinced that Mr. Chetwode was quite as bad as you thought him. And—and he is dead, you see!"

Bobby nodded. He had not altered his opinion of Mark; but there was no longer any occasion for him to give expression to it. After a short interval of silence, he reverted to the original topic of discussion.

"Of course, I could afford to live without any profession now," he said, "and my people rather want me to retire; but it seems to me that I should be a very great fool if I did. I couldn't spend the rest of my life loafing about down here with nothing to occupy me."

"I suppose you couldn't," agreed Cicely. "Selfishly speaking, I am sorry that you are going away,

because I shall miss you dreadfully; but for your own sake I am glad."

"Will you really miss me?" asked Bobby; "or do you only say that out of kindness?"

"I say it because it is true. I haven't so many friends left here that I can afford to lose one."

"Well," observed Bobby, "it is something to know that you look upon me as a friend."

"Did I ever look upon you as anything else?"

"At one time I thought you did. I seemed to be rather meddlesome, and perhaps I was; but I couldn't help it."

"Oh, you were right. Haven't I just confessed as much?"

"My intentions were good, at all events. I said to myself: 'As there is no hope for you, you might as well give another honest fellow a chance, if you can.'" He added, after a momentary pause, "I suppose there *is* no hope?"

"I don't quite know what you mean," answered Cicely, with pardonable mendacity.

"I mean, of course, that I love you, and that I always shall. Jane says I ought to ask you again, but I know it's quite useless."

"I thought you had got over that long ago," said Cicely, without looking at him.

"Oh, no, I haven't got over it, and I don't expect to get over it. I'm not sure that I even wish to get over it. But I have never deceived myself about the matter. You may not have cared for any one else; but you have certainly never cared for me."

Cicely raised her eyes for a moment and glanced at the handsome young face beside her. All of a sudden she seemed to know that she had always loved him. It was hardly a discovery: it was only an admission, and if she had not made the admission to herself before, that was only because she had imagined that his boyish flame had died down. Nevertheless, she felt that it would be impossible for her to accept him. Within the last few months she had been engaged to one man and had been upon the point—or, at any rate, everybody thought so—of engaging herself to another; could she, now that her two lovers were dead, seem to console herself with this third one as a *pis-aller?* No! that would be too humiliating and would look too heartless. So she replied:

"I am very grateful to you, and I only wish I were more worthy of your love; but—but you will find

somebody more worthy in time. As for me, I shall never marry."

"You mean that you will never marry me," observed Bobby, smiling. "Well—I knew that."

They walked on in silence for some little distance; but, when they neared the house, Bobby resumed:

"I don't think I'll go in with you. One can't talk when one knows that one will have to say good-bye in a few minutes. I'll say good-bye now, please."

"Are you going away immediately, then?" asked Cicely.

"Yes; I hope so. There's nothing to keep me here now, and though I didn't in the least expect any other answer than the answer that you have given me, still—it *is*, in a sort of way, a disappointment. Do what one will, one can't quite help hoping against hope."

Cicely gave him her hand.

"Well," she said, "good-bye, if it must be good-bye." She added, half involuntarily, "Don't forget me."

Now, it is evident that ordinary kindness of feeling should have made her wish that he might forget her; and even if she did not wish it, it would have been only in accordance with immemorial custom to say that

she did. Possibly some dim perception of this may have crossed his mind, for he coloured up suddenly and looked her straight in the face, which he had not done before.

"I don't know," Cicely said to him, about ten minutes afterwards, how you can have seen anything in my face that you might not have seen long ago, if you hadn't been so desperately stupid. But, perhaps, you weren't really as stupid as you pretended to be. I believe you knew all about it from the first—though I assure you I didn't."

"The first!" repeated Bobby, wonderingly. "What do you call the first? Not that miserable night of the dance, when you refused me in such decisive terms?"

"Yes, that same wretched night. I was dreadfully unhappy after it, and though I didn't know why I was unhappy, you might have known. Are you sure you didn't?"

"I am quite sure," answered Bobby; "and until a few minutes ago I was quite sure that you cared about as much for me as you do for—for old Lowndes. When I wake up to-morrow morning I shall certainly think that all this is a dream."

"You will very soon be convinced that it is an awful reality," sighed Cicely. "People won't exactly condole with you because I am so rich; but I'm afraid they will congratulate you in a rather ironical manner, and I know just what they will say about me."

However, Cicely did her neighbours an injustice; for nobody said anything disagreeable about her when it was announced that she was engaged to Bobby Dare, nor did any one grudge him his good fortune. The general opinion was that she might have done a great deal worse; and in this instance the general opinion was probably correct—which is not always the case. For Cicely is ruled by her affections, and as she adores her husband, who is a very sensible man, there is good reason to hope that the duties of which he has declined to relieve her will be discharged more satisfactorily than they would have been, had she carried out her intention of remaining single.

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